English Studies

ISSN: 0013-838X (Print) 1744-4217 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/nest20

Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare: Stephen Greenblatt and the Existentialist Power of Literature

Nicolas Vandeviver & Jürgen Pieters

To cite this article: Nicolas Vandeviver & Jürgen Pieters (2015) Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare: Stephen Greenblatt and the Existentialist Power of Literature, English Studies, 96:8, 944-967, DOI: 10.1080/0013838X.2015.1078585

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2015.1078585

English Studies, 2015
Vol. 96, No. 8, 944–967, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2015.1078585

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare: Stephen Greenblatt and the Existentialist Power of Literature

Nicolas Vandeviver and Jürgen Pieters

This article focuses on the eclectic theoretical underpinnings of Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism. Taking the opening of Shakespeare's Freedom *as our outset we examine the unique status of freedom that Shakespeare embodies in several of Greenblatt's books. In our analysis, we suggest that next to Foucault's post-structuralism, Sartre's existentialism is of equal importance to the understanding of his new historicism. To support this claim we first argue that Greenblatt's conception of the specific position of Shakespeare's literary writings within the cultural context of their production can be related to Sartre's conception of engaged writing as a form of cultural disclosure. Next, we want to show how Greenblatt's conception of freedom as a form of self-fashioning resembles Sartre's analysis of human existence. We conclude that Greenblatt's Shakespeare, combining a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power and a Sartrean concept of imagination, can be seen as an allegory of the existentialist hero.*

> Je suis condamné à exister pour toujours par delà mon essence, par delà les mobiles et les motifs de mon acte: je suis condamné à être libre. Cela signifie qu'on ne saurait trouver à ma liberté d'autres limites qu'elle même ou, si l'on préfère, que nous ne sommes pas libres de cesser d'être libres.[1]

Introduction

> Shakespeare as a writer is the embodiment of human freedom. He seems to have been able to fashion language to say anything he imagined, to conjure up any character, to express any emotion, to explore any idea. Though he lived his life as the bound subject of a monarch in a strictly hierarchical society that policed expression in speech and print, he possessed what Hamlet calls a free soul.[2]

Nicolas Vandeviver is PhD Fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders, Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. Email: nicolas.vandeviver@ugent.be. Jürgen Pieters is affiliated with the Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University, Belgium. Email: jurgen.pieters@ugent.be

[1]Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, 494.

[2]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 1.

The opening sentences of Stephen Greenblatt's 2010 *Shakespeare's Freedom* are bound to baffle at least some of its readers, especially those well versed in the genealogy of the new historicism with which Greenblatt's name came to be identified from the early 1980s on. Here is how Greenblatt described Shakespeare's relationship to his cultural surroundings exactly thirty years before the publication of *Shakespeare's Freedom*, in the closing chapter of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, the book that in many ways laid the foundations of the new historicism to come: "Shakespeare approaches his culture not, like Marlowe, as rebel and blasphemer, but rather as dutiful servant, content to improvise a part of his own within its orthodoxy".[3] For Greenblatt writing in 1980, Shakespeare does not really *want* to explore any idea or say anything that he wants—he appears to be happy to limit himself to discussing what his culture puts on offer, in ways that are, moreover, legitimised by that culture. If Shakespeare should be seen as the embodiment of a specific form of freedom, Greenblatt seems to argue in the years of the budding new historicism, we should take care not to mistake this freedom for a boundless, absolute form of liberty in which anything can be done, said, or even thought. Rather, like those of the other five early-modern individuals whose writings and lives are central to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the acts, words and thoughts of Shakespeare are products of ideological paradigms and institutions, not the results of an autonomous individual who could "say anything he imagined". On the contrary, in the epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt explicitly doubts the possibility of absolute human freedom that in the opening paragraph of *Shakespeare's Freedom* the Bard would appear to embody. "In all my texts and documents", Greenblatt concluded in 1980,

> there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society. Whenever I focused sharply upon a moment of apparently autonomous self-fashioning, I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artifact. If there remained traces of free choice, the choice was among possibilities whose range was strictly delineated by the social and ideological system in force.[4]

For the Greenblatt of the 1980s, Shakespeare's authorial stance seems to be different from the ideal of freedom that is asserted in *Shakespeare's Freedom*'s opening paragraph—if not absolutely or substantially different, then at least in degree. "[T]he dream of autonomous agency, though intensely experienced and tenaciously embraced", Greenblatt reminded his readers in the introduction to the 2005 re-edition of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, "is only a dream".[5] The ideal of human freedom—what Greenblatt used to label Renaissance self-fashioning—is but a choice strictly delineated by an ideologico-discursive framework in the work of the

[3]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 253.
[4]Ibid., 256.
[5]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (anniversary ed.), xi.

early 1980s. To move beyond the boundaries of this framework and to obtain the supra-ideological position of absolute autonomy is simply not a choice on offer and therefore impossible. There is no point beyond the ideology of self-fashioning that is the subject of Greenblatt's early work.[6]

As Greenblatt suggested time and again, it is important to see the concept of self-fashioning against the backdrop of the historical moment that is central to his work. This historical moment is one in which a relatively new ideology begins to manifest itself of which the driving force is the idea that man takes part in the fashioning of the self. Throughout Greenblatt's work it becomes clear that the early-modern experience of being an individual and of having both the possibility and the duty to fashion oneself, are two related aspects of one ideological imperative: the ideologico-discursive framework in which subjects are embedded urges them to fashion their selves in correlation to the ideals promoted by the ideology.[7] Self-fashioning, therefore, is at the same time a cultural demand and a voluntary action of individuals who will be able to define their freedom within the boundaries of the culture that expects them to behave freely.

To be sure, in *Shakespeare's Freedom* Greenblatt does not completely revise his earlier analysis of the early-modern culture of self-fashioning. He does, however, seem to take a different stance on Shakespeare's place in (our understanding of) that culture. In the paragraph that follows upon the quotation with which we began this article, Greenblatt goes on to write that, obviously, Shakespeare should not be seen as a paragon of absolute freedom; that sort of freedom, he continues to stress, simply did not exist in Shakespeare's time. In a careful balancing act that rehearses his view of a cultural constellation as a system of constraints that does not, however, exclude the possibility of mobility and freedom,[8] Greenblatt goes on to write:

> [I]f Shakespeare is the epitome of freedom, he is also a figure of limits. These limits are not constraints on Shakespeare's imagination or literary genius. Doubtless there were such constraints—notwithstanding his aura of divinity, he was, after all, a mortal—but I am among those who are struck rather by the apparently unbounded power and visionary scope of his achievement. No, the limits that he embodied are ones he himself disclosed and explored throughout his career, whenever he directed

[6]The theme of a pervasive ideology of self-fashioning from which there is no escape, is not a novel conclusion in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. It is already distinctly present in *Sir Walter Ralegh*, Stephen Greenblatt's 1973 book on Sir Walter Ralegh (Pieters, 49–51), and, less distinctly so, even in his first book *Three Modern Satirists*, on Orwell, Waugh, and Huxley (Stevens, 502–3).

[7]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 75–6.

[8]In his definition of the concept of *culture* in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin's *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Greenblatt writes:

> We might begin by reflecting on the fact that the concept gestures toward what appear to be opposite things: *constraint* and *mobility*. The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behavior must be contained, a repertoire of models to which individuals must conform. The limits need not be narrow ... but they are not infinite, and the consequences for straying beyond them can be severe. (Greenblatt, "Culture," 225).

> his formidable intelligence to absolutes of any kind. These limits served as the enabling condition of his particular freedom.[9]

Our point is not so much that the opening page of *Shakespeare's Freedom* is in blatant contradiction with the epilogue to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, though there is a distinct difference between the two publications in the ways in which Greenblatt conceptualises Shakespeare's cultural labour. "Shakespeare relentlessly *explores* the relations of power in a given culture", Greenblatt writes in 1980, yet he concludes: "That more than exploration is involved is much harder to demonstrate convincingly."[10] The careful conclusion is in line with the central historical message of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. As Greenblatt argues in this book, early-modern England was characterised by an institutionalised ideology that thrived on the idea that individuals could fashion their own identity to a certain degree and within certain bounds. The conclusion is also in line with the central methodological premise of the book's theoretical underpinnings, derived from writings on *assujettissement* by Althusser, Macherey, Foucault and Lacan. Since the selves that Greenblatt is writing about are the very products of the early-modern ideology that he wants to analyse,[11] Greenblatt should (and does) refrain from suggesting that certain individuals—on account of whatever unique gifts they may be thought to possess—can obtain a unique position outside the ideology. Yet, from the way the book is organised—six case studies in six chapters, each one focusing on a distinctive individual —critics like Jean Howard have argued that this is precisely what the books seemed to suggest. In spite of its theoretical programme, Howard argued, Greenblatt's book "invites the reader to assume that these men to some degree, at least, transcended pervasive cultural paradigms for fashioning identity and left their marks *as individuals*".[12] Moreover, Howard stressed, among these individuals Shakespeare clearly stands out as the *primus inter pares* whose unique act of cultural exploration and self-fashioning is unmatched and difficult to categorise. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, she concluded, Greenblatt "pays repeated homage ... to Shakespeare's intellectual illusiveness, as if afraid of reducing Shakespeare's 'genius' by identifying him too closely with any particular cultural group or mode of self-fashioning".[13]

Interestingly, *Shakespeare's Freedom* opens with the same metaphor to which Greenblatt turned in the epilogue to his book of 1980: the Bard is a cultural *explorer*. The difference that we're after, clearly, does not lie in the choice of words, but in the way that in the latter book Greenblatt lets go of his initial reservations regarding

[9]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 1.
[10]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 254 (his italics).
[11]In his conceptualisation of the self as a prime ideological product, Greenblatt is clearly alluding to Louis Althusser's seminal essay on ideological interpellation first published in 1970. In that text, Althusser argued that ideology functions by means of what he called Ideological State Apparatuses which interpellate individuals as subjects to an ideology and, as a result of this submissive interpellation, produce them as subjects (Althusser).
[12]Howard, 380.
[13]Ibid., 381.

Shakespeare's unique position. Shakespeare is still seen by Greenblatt as an explorer of the limits of his culture, but he is now singled out on account of his "formidable intelligence" and an "apparently unbounded power and visionary scope". This visionary insight allows him not only to merely explore the limits of his culture, but in doing so to "disclos[e]" them. In this article, we want to find out what has changed in Greenblatt's analysis for him to drop his previous reservations about Shakespeare's unique status as an individual in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, by now explicitly singling out the Bard as the epitome of a particular kind of freedom others fail to achieve. While we don't aim to give a full analysis of the conceptual development of Greenblatt's work, we are convinced that the specific case that we are singling out is significant for a better understanding of the theoretical footings upon which Greenblatt's historical analysis rests from the very outset of his new historicist project. As we will suggest, the broader historical analysis that Greenblatt's work offers does not necessarily change between the two books under scrutiny. Indeed, there are several passages in *Shakespeare's Freedom* that echo Greenblatt's earlier analysis of the early-modern paradigm of cultural self-fashioning, as for instance in the book's fifth chapter where Greenblatt refers to *Coriolanus* as a play that shows that "Shakespeare doubted that it was possible even for the most fiercely determined human being to live as if he were the author of himself".[14] What does change, we hope to demonstrate, is the presence of an existentialist intertext within the theoretical framework underpinning Greenblatt's reading method: while in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* this intertext is only implicitly present it becomes more dominant in *Shakespeare's Freedom*.

From Foucault to Sartre

By now it's a hackneyed story that in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Greenblatt grappled with the theories and insights of European—most notably French—post-structuralism in general and with Michel Foucault in particular. Several contributors to the first new historicist anthology[15] stressed the indebtedness of Greenblatt's reading practice to Foucault's conceptualisation of power and his later work on pre-modern and modern techniques of the self.[16] Since then, the story has been reiterated by Greenblatt himself[17] and rehearsed in more recent surveys of the new historicism, both in monographs dedicated to the movement and in introductions to literary theory.[18]

However widely held the idea may seem, the Foucauldian origins of the new historicism remain up for debate. Most recently, Martin Dzelzainis has argued that Greenblatt's references to Foucault only seem to have been added in hindsight, as a

[14]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 111.
[15]Veeser, ed.
[16]Fox-Genovese; Graff, 169; and Lentricchia.
[17]Greenblatt, "Introduction," 3; Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," 146–7; Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (anniversary ed.), xiv–xv.
[18]Brannigan, 42–53; Eagleton, 197–8; Robson, 12; and Culler, 144.

retrospective theoretical illumination. From the way in which Greenblatt introduces these references and engages with them, Dzelzainis concludes that they should not be read as an indication of a formative influence of the French philosopher on Greenblatt's budding new historicist project.[19] In this respect, Dzelzainis seems to concur with Catherine Belsey, who finds the differences between Greenblatt's cultural poetics and Foucault's genealogical analyses too radical to believe in an influential force of the latter on the former's new historicist practice.[20] In Belsey's view,

> poststructuralism played virtually no part in the composition of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. ... [T]he model of power it assumes owes very little to Foucault. On the contrary, the roots of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* are to be found in American culture, and this fact played a major part in its extraordinary institutional success.[21]

As Belsey sees it, Greenblatt's model of cultures as force-fields of power is based upon the American strand of functionalist pragmatism of Talcott Parsons and Clifford Geertz. If Foucault has any influential role to play in the new historicist story, she goes on, it is stylistically rather than conceptually.[22]

Without wanting to disclaim the views of Belsey and Dzelzainis, we cannot help but notice that Greenblatt still seems to hold on to a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power in *Shakespeare's Freedom*. Analysing the ethics of authority in Shakespearean drama, for instance, he concludes that power is inescapably present in society. Because power is always circulating it is impossible to be stably possessed by anyone, but rather demands to be performed, Greenblatt argues: "Power exists to be exercised in the world. It will not go away if you close your eyes and dream of escaping into your study or your lover's arms or your daughter's house. It will simply be seized by someone else, probably someone more coldly efficient than you."[23] Also, it would take a good deal of bad faith to miss the Foucauldian vocabulary that runs through the opening page of the book from which we quoted earlier. There, Greenblatt is talking about *policing* what can be said—a term that is central to Foucault's analysis of the early modern period, both in *Surveiller et Punir* (1975) and in the courses at the Collège de France of the second half of the seventies.[24] The unfree, Greenblatt goes on to write, is the "subjected"[25]—Foucault's *assujettissement*—and he is, in the last sentence of the book's second paragraph, trying to show how given cultural limits are the very *conditions de possibilité*—a phrase that Foucault also uses regularly and notably, in *L'Ordre du Discours*, for one—of what is described here as Shakespeare's freedom.[26]

[19]Dzelzainis, 214.
[20]Belsey, *Loss of Eden*, 17–18.
[21]Belsey, "Historicizing New Historicism," 29.
[22]Ibid., 35–6.
[23]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 81.
[24]Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*.
[25]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 1.
[26]Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours*.

Still, however indebted the book really may be to Foucault, a limiting focus on the Foucauldian undertones of Greenblatt's writing tells only part of the tale of *Shakespeare's Freedom* and certainly does not fully explain Greenblatt's emphasis on the particular and individual freedom that Shakespeare embodies. In fact, it only makes that freedom more paradoxical if not downright cynical. After all, how can this freedom be called freedom if it is ultimately the product of a series of constraints, forces of subjection and mechanisms of policing? A Foucauldian analysis of culture surely would not assume its subjects to be autonomous or free because everything that a writer like Shakespeare could imagine, conjure up, express or explore is suggested and determined by a preset discursive order and code. And yet, if we know all of this—that no subject, not even a great poet such as Shakespeare, is ever able to break free from the cultural constraints, and moreover, that human freedom is a mere phantasm—why does Greenblatt persist on using the problematically charged term in the opening pages of his book? Why does he even foreground it in the book's very title? It is clear that to obtain a full understanding of Shakespeare's freedom we will have to look elsewhere. We will do so by following up on Belsey's remark and consider the American context of Greenblatt's new historicism. Ironically, as we will see, the all-out "American tale"[27] of the theoretical origins of the new historicism turns out to have a strong French accent —not the accent of Foucault, though, but that of Jean-Paul Sartre, the famous *Rive Gauche* philosopher in response to whose humanist existentialism Foucault elaborated his own anti-humanist conceptualisation of the self.[28]

In a 2002 article on the background of the new historicism Paul Stevens already argued that next to French post-structuralism popular existentialism had an equally foundational impact on the genesis of Greenblatt's critical practice.[29] Stevens reads Greenblatt's famous obsession with anecdotes and storytelling[30] as a symptom of a genuine desire to obtain an authentic identity through the act of self-fashioning. For Stevens, this quintessentially existentialist dream of authenticity is "the central driving force behind Greenblatt's criticism".[31] The seeds of this dream were sewn, Stevens believes, by Alvin Kernan, Greenblatt's mentor during his formative MPhil years at Yale. As Stevens sees it, Greenblatt must have absorbed much of the popular existentialist thought through Kernan's teachings. While Yale was no doubt an important place in the dissemination of existentialist thought in post-war America,[32] the entire American intellectual debate and popular culture had soaked

[27]Belsey, "Historicizing New Historicism," 41.
[28]See Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics," 262.
[29]Stevens, 499–500.
[30]Greenblatt loves telling autobiographical stories: ranging from anecdotes about the start of his academic career at Berkeley during the tumultuous anti-Vietnam campus riots (Greenblatt, "Introduction," 4–5), to a disappointing holiday stay at the River View Hotel in Vientiane, Laos (Greenblatt, "Laos is Open"), to a discussion about *Macbeth* with president Bill Clinton on a poetry evening at the White House (Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 74–5).
[31]Stevens, 494.
[32]Cotkin, 110.

up so many existentialist themes and topics during Greenblatt's formative years that it is hardly possible or fruitful to pinpoint Kernan as the prime source of Greenblatt's budding existentialism. Existentialism was a vogue: not simply a philosophy, it was first and foremost a lifestyle and "[n]early everyone, it seemed, coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s America danced the song of French existentialism".[33] Greenblatt was clearly no exception. Listening more closely to the lyrics of that song might offer us some novel insights in Greenblatt's conceptualisation of literature and its cultural function and at the same time help us unravel the paradox of *Shakespeare's Freedom*.

To do so, let us begin by reconsidering the first sentence of that book: "Shakespeare *as a writer* is the embodiment of human freedom."[34] The suggestion could be—if at least we stress that bit of the quotation—that it was primarily (if not solely) in his capacity of writer that Shakespeare was able to do what Greenblatt suggests he was so good at: to disclose the discursive limits of his cultural moment and by doing so to offer to his readers on the basis of that disclosure a certain perspective on freedom that is fairly unique. The question, then, is what exactly should we consider Greenblatt to be saying when he says "as a writer"? Is he referring to the fact that writers like Shakespeare, writers of literary texts—that is, fictional texts—on account of the specificity of their medium—the fictional nature of these texts—manage to reveal things that other texts—non-fictional texts—cannot reveal? Or is he saying that among literary writers, Shakespeare is unique in achieving this sense of freedom, not so much on account of the nature of his medium—because he shares that medium with other literary writers whose work obviously does not have the same effect on Greenblatt as Shakespeare's—but on account of his treatment of it? The latter question obviously begs another one, if we answer the former question positively at least: what would that treatment be? In what follows, we will try to formulate an answer to these questions that intends to show, one, how Greenblatt's conception of the specific position of Shakespeare's literary writings within the cultural context of their production can be related to Sartre's conception of engaged writing as a form of disclosure and, two, how Greenblatt's conception of freedom as a form of self-fashioning can be related to Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of human existence.

Shakespeare as an Engaged Writer: Action by Disclosure

It is a well-known fact that the new historicism, in line with the postmodern narrativism of Hayden White and his likes,[35] argues that fictional and non-fictional texts represent events by means of the same rhetorical and figurative mechanisms. As a result, Greenblatt openly renounces the theoretical distinction between literary and non-

[33]Ibid., 1.
[34]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 1 (our emphasis).
[35]See White, 121–2.

literary writings.[36] Nevertheless, Greenblatt still seems to discern a crucial difference between both types of texts, confessing that "those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations—in the formal, self-conscious miming of life—than in any other textual traces left by the dead".[37] To him, fictional texts seem to be bursting with life. While it might at first sight seem paradoxical that there is even the slightest spark of life present in a fictional text—after all, Greenblatt argues, unlike in factual, historiographical representations, in fictions "there was no bodily being to begin with"[38]—it is precisely the awareness of this absence of concrete life that triggers an anticipatory reaction of the author to make his work more resonant from the start by letting it absorb its context of production to the fullest extent. As a consequence, Greenblatt writes:

> The literary text remains the central object of my attention ... in part because ... great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture and in part because ... whatever interpretative powers I possess are released by the resonances of literature. ... So from the thousands [of writers] we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns.[39]

Greenblatt privileges literary texts above other discursive genres, because in his opinion literature is the most intense expression of the human mind and thus the best entry-point into the larger cultural fabric—its harmonies, tensions, limits and constraints—of a given historical moment.

Frank Lentricchia, for one, has described Greenblatt's obvious penchant for literature in terms reminiscent of the existentialist discourse that Stevens detected in Greenblatt's work.[40] As Lentricchia puts it, Greenblatt's analyses suggest that literature is a distinct cultural form which has "the unique privilege of putting us into authentic contact with the real thing through the medium of the "great writer" and his canonical texts".[41] Fiction is a source of authenticity, it provides us with what Greenblatt was later to call a "touch of the real",[42] not *despite* the fact that these texts are fictional, but precisely on account of it. Literary texts are imaginative by nature and therefore

[36]Greenblatt, "Introduction," 13–14; Greenblatt, "History of Literature," 476.
[37]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1.
[38]Ibid.
[39]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 5–6.
[40]Similarly, in a 1984 essay on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Barbara Leah Harman already used existentialist terminology to describe the privileged status that Greenblatt attributes to literary texts and their authors. Another telling sign of Greenblatt's penchant for literature is that the only significant examples of resistance precisely take place in (complex) literary texts. Harman (Harman, 63–4) therefore wonders if there is something special to Greenblatt's conceptualisation of *literary* discourse in relation to self-fashioning. Furthermore, she seems to be the first critic to explicitly link Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning to existentialist terms such as *good faith* and *bad faith* (ibid., 64).
[41]Lentricchia, 233.
[42]Gallagher and Greenblatt, 31.

able to survive more easily. The underlying idea, borrowed from Raymond Williams, is that literary texts are the best expressions of the cultural codes that govern and shape subjectivity at a certain historical moment, because of the extent to which these texts have absorbed these codes. This makes them the most powerful verbal practices we can imagine and concrete loci for the critic to establish an authentic contact with an actually experienced and lived moment in the past.

This compound of ideas functions not only as the driving force behind Greenblatt's famous "desire to speak with the dead",[43] it also allows him in *Shakespeare's Freedom* to detect "vivid glimpses of lived lives"[44] in Shakespeare's imaginative literature. The adjective will not surprise readers of Greenblatt's work: in previous publications it also served to sustain Greenblatt's conviction that the historical power of great literature was to be found in its capacity to give life to what is essentially dead material. In "The Touch of the Real", the opening chapter of *Practicing New Historicism*, Greenblatt claims, in tandem with his co-author Catherine Gallagher, that the ultimate goal of their reading method was "to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if we knew that we could not find these—the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent—we could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience".[45] Literature, Gallagher and Greenblatt conclude, is just about as close as one can get to this actual experience, "because its creators had invented techniques for representing this experience with uncanny vividness".[46]

Greenblatt's attempts to access actual life and grasp, through the analysis of their literary texts, how authors like Shakespeare experienced and lived their cultural moment —that is, the codes that shape subjectivity—highly resembles an existentialist approach to literature and its focus on lived experience, what Sartre calls *le vécu*, that which is being lived. The concept, as Sartre uses it, is meant to signify a form of intuitive feeling that basically goes beyond verbalised experience and is related to the ineffable psychic experience of living. "*[L]e vécu*. ...", Sartre explains, "ne désigne ni les refuges du préconscient, ni l'inconscient, ni le conscient, mais le terrain sur lequel l'individu est constamment submergé par lui-même, par ses propres richesses, et où la conscience a l'astuce de se déterminer elle-même par l'oubli."[47] Sartre coined the term in an analysis of how Flaubert, in his letters and autobiographical writings, never mentioned his problematic relationship with his parents. In that analysis, Sartre argued that although the author intuitively seemed conscious of the depths of this unconsciously repressed and smothered personal history, his failure to rationally pinpoint and voice his intuitions is the sign of "une absence totale de connaissance doublée d'une réelle compréhension et intellection".[48] Sartre, then, goes on to explain the term as follows:

[43]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1.
[44]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 8.
[45]Gallagher and Greenblatt, 30.
[46]Ibid.
[47]Sartre, "Sartre par Sartre," 108.
[48]Ibid., 111.

> Ce que j'appelle *le vécu*, c'est précisément l'ensemble du processus dialectique de la vie psychique, un processus qui reste nécessairement opaque à lui-même car il est une constante totalisation, et une totalisation qui ne peut être conscient de ce qu'elle est. On peut être conscient, en effet, d'une totalisation extérieure, mais non d'une totalisation qui totalise également la conscience. En ce sens, le vécu est toujours susceptible de compréhension, jamais de connaissance.[49]

The last sentence is of interest here. Because the *vécu* is not a traditional form of conceptual knowledge Sartre argues that it cannot be known, but only comprehended or felt. This aspect of Sartre's concept has strong affinities with Greenblatt's rather vague and in our view still underdeveloped notion of social energy and its resonances, a concept that he never convincingly defines because, at least that seems to be the suggestion, it is not subject to rational knowledge. According to him, the feeling of resonance and establishing contact with actual historical life is an experience that cannot be precisely pinpointed to one rational concept or another but is "associated with repeatable forms of pleasure and interest, with the capacity to arouse disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder".[50] In short, it is a feeling which is, like Sartre's *vécu*, not simply beyond words, but *before* words, so to speak—it is that which provokes a subject to speak.

Although irreducibly ineffable, the *vécu* is nonetheless communicable through literature and its imaginative use of language. Sartre too, like Greenblatt, stresses the importance of the specific *imaginative* nature of literary texts. It is precisely because these texts are imaginative that they arrive at communicating the *vécu*—an accomplishment non-literary forms of writing are hardly capable of achieving. Examining literature convinces Sartre that works of imagination are the most powerful verbal practices and for that reason the best medium of intersubjective communication. Critics therefore discern at the heart of his existentialism faith "in the imagination as the means of communicating and receiving the kind of truth which is non-conceptual, or in Sartre's terms, as the means of access to the *vécu* of another person".[51] In *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?*, Sartre argues that the unique communicative power of literature enables critics to arrive at the deeper reality of the *condition humaine*, which literature, unlike any other form of art, is able to convey.[52] Sartre is convinced that even the simplest literary tale can tell its readers all that they need to know about the world. This belief is one of the reasons why Sartre chose to write novels, plays and short stories besides his philosophical treatises

[49]Ibid.
[50]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 6.
[51]Howells, 579.
[52]Sartre, *Qu'est que la littérature?*, 333–4. Two years earlier, in *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Jean-Paul Sartre explained what he meant precisely by *condition humaine*. Although he has ruled out the possibility of an a-priori essential human nature (Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 22), Sartre still believes in an intersubjective universal category that allows individuals to feel connected across cultures and ages. This universal human condition is not a given category, but constructed and shared by all humans, regardless of race, ethnicity and gender (ibid., 67–71).

and why he intended his imaginative art to be more than just an illustration of his philosophy but an integral part of his thinking.[53]

Another reason why Sartre chose to write literary texts is not only their power to communicate lived lives but also the unique agency inherent in the act of writing these texts. He became aware of that special agency when writing down his experiences of his military service as a conscript in the Alsace region, from the Phoney War of 1939–40 up to the first months of the Second World War prior to the French surrender at Compiègne. In *Les Carnets de la Drôle de Guerre*,[54] his diaries of that period, he tries to grasp how we can authentically act and be ourselves within interpersonal networks that were forced upon us and within situations we never chose to find ourselves to be in in the first place. His goal in *Les Carnets* is to develop an ethics of choice in order to face the utter contingency of existence. What can we do to change our lives in an ultimately contingent situation? What do we *choose* to do? Before we can answer that question and decide on our choice, we have to gain a special insight in our complex situation and reveal the choices that are on offer. Sartre's way par excellence to explore the complexity of human existence and reflect a situation in order to change it is to imaginatively envision and disclose that situation by writing down or narrating his experiences.[55]

Sartre's war diaries prefigure his post-war works. The ideas he sketched out in *Les Carnets* would eventually be elaborated in later works such as *l'Être et le Néant* (1943) or *Qu'est que la Littérature?* (1948).[56] The prefiguration becomes apparent when Sartre discusses the nature of engaged writing in the latter work, especially when he explicitly makes clear that narrating and writing are important performatives in the shaping of our lives. "Parler, c'est agir", he writes, because "en parlant, je dévoile la situation par mon projet même de la changer; je la dévoile à moi-même et aux autres *pour* la changer."[57] Writing is an act of disclosure and when a literary writer chooses to disclose a situation he does this with a mind on changing that situation. As such, writers make use of the medium's unique power of agency which Sartre calls *action by disclosure* ("l'action par dévoilement"[58]). When we read a literary text, we must ask why its author chose to disclose this aspect of the situation in which he is embedded and which changes he wanted to bring about by disclosing that aspect. After all, a self-

[53]Suhl, 267; and Geldof, 257. In fact, literary texts are such a fundamentally important aspect of Sartre's existentialism that some critics would even prefer to regard his philosophy as a specialised form of literature (see Moran, 389).

[54]Sartre, *Les Carnets*.

[55]Geldof, 249–50; and Moran, 363.

[56]Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*; Sartre, *Qu'est que la littérature?*

[57]Sartre, *Qu'est que la littérature?*, 29.

[58]Ibid., 30. Gary Cox (6) elucidates Sartre's concept, explaining that a successful engaged writer is an author who makes his readers aware of contemporary cultural norms by asking challenging questions about these norms. Committed literature therefore rallies its readers and has a liberating effect as it "provokes rather than sedates, it is a stimulant that is capable of bringing an individual, a group, a whole social class, out of a state of alienation into an awareness of freedom" (Cox, 7).

conscious writer, Sartre goes on, "sait que la parole est action: il sait que dévoiler c'est changer et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer."[59]

Existentialists consequently consider literature as the privileged medium that not only arrives at communicating a higher or deeper reality—because of its unique ability to offer access to actually lived lives (the *vécu*)—but is also exceptional in allowing its author to disclose a part of the culture in which he is embedded (the being-in-situation of the writer) and at the same time reflecting the possibilities of change. This imaginative reflection on life and the resulting insights in the paths a subject can take leading to change is a quintessential human experience which Sartre more strongly finds in the texts of great writers than in their lesser contemporaries: "chez les plus grands [auteurs], il y a bien autre chose. Chez Gide, chez Claudel, chez Proust, on trouve un expérience d'homme, mille chemins".[60] The underlying suggestion seems to be that a great author is someone who employs his artistic insight in the world to both acknowledge and at the same time shake off the burdens of his antecedent condition. In this way great authors live their life authentically and achieve a higher status of freedom than their lesser colleagues.

When we turn to Greenblatt's new historicism we discern a similar belief in the special agency which flows from the writing process. Stevens already connected Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning to Sartre's famous aphorism that *existence precedes essence*.[61] Similar to existentialists, new historicists rule out the existence of an a-priori human essence which would make self-fashioning obsolete. Due to the lack of this essence, we have to fill in our subjectivity ourselves, by improvising, responding and adapting ourselves on a daily basis to the changing situations we unintentionally encounter. But how can we improvise a part of our own in situations we can never fully control? How does the mechanism of self-fashioning function? Subjects do not autonomously fashion their selves, inventing novel ways time and time again. Instead they make use of different practices and techniques which are proposed, suggested and even imposed by the culture they are embedded in.[62] Perhaps the most important one of these techniques is narration. Greenblatt stresses that self-fashioning is a predominantly linguistic activity of which the narrative aspect is of the prime importance.[63] Its rationale is the following: to tell a story, is to fashion one's identity. As a result, Greenblatt repeatedly talks about *narrative self-fashioning*, a concept which functions as a cornerstone in his at times overtly autobiographical criticism: "My earliest recollections of 'having an identity' or 'being a self' are bound up with story-telling—narrating my own life or having it narrated for me by my

[59]Sartre, *Qu'est que la littérature?*, 30.
[60]Ibid., 219.
[61]Stevens, 500. Sartre uses this aphorism to argue that "l'homme existe d'abord, se rencontre, surgit dans le monde, et qu'il se définit après. L'homme, tel que le conçoit l'existentialiste, s'il n'est pas définissable, c'est qu'il n'est d'abord rien. Il ne sera qu'ensuite, et il sera tel qu'il se sera fait" (Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 21–2).
[62]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 4.
[63]Ibid., 9.

mother. ... [T]he heart of the initial experience of selfhood lay in the stories, not in the unequivocal, unmediated possession of an identity."[64] Narrating his experiences or having them narrated helps Greenblatt to fashion his self and reflect his identity, making narration, both in its oral and scriptural form, a powerful device of agency. That power is also reflected in the threefold function of literature within the cultural system of self-fashioning: apart from being a manifestation of the concrete behaviour of its author and an expression of the active cultural codes—two functions we have already dealt with—a literary text is at the same time "a reflection upon those codes".[65]

This cultural-reflective function relates Greenblatt's conceptualisation of literature to the existentialist view of literature as action by disclosure. Greenblatt's readings of the six authors *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* deals with—Thomas More, William Tyndale, Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare—illustrate how these authors, all in their own distinct ways, fashion their identity by disclosing and reflecting upon the cultural constraints they are confronted with. From the way Greenblatt describes how these authors produce cultural-reflective, self-fashioning narratives, we still find that "it is hard ... to refrain from considering these authors as human beings who had special insight into the working of the ideology of the historical moment to which they belong".[66] That insight is the result of these authors' exploration of certain aspects of their culture in their literary texts and in its turn allows them to take up a position of relative freedom in that culture.

This kind of liberating action resembles what Sartre had in mind with the concept of action by disclosure and it is also the kind of action that enables the particular freedom of authors such as Shakespeare. In *Shakespeare's Freedom* Greenblatt makes clear that by using his imagination Shakespeare was able to obtain an extraordinary insight in his cultural moment and from that insight gain a special status of freedom. Creating in his plays what one might call laboratory situations, Shakespeare could imagine and reflect the contradictions and constraints governing particular aspects of his culture—such as beauty and individuation, hatred and revenge, authority and its effects on the lives of others and aesthetic autonomy—by having his characters face them:

> His kings repeatedly discover the constraints within which they must function if they hope to survive. His generals draw lines on maps and issue peremptory commands, only to find that the reality on the ground defies their designs. So too his proud churchmen are mocked for pretensions, while religious visionaries, who claim to be in direct communication with the divine, are exposed as frauds. Above all, perhaps, it is Shakespeare's lovers who encounter again and again the boundaries that society or nature sets to the most exalted and seemingly unconfined passions.[67]

[64]Greenblatt, "Introduction," 6.
[65]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 4.
[66]Pieters, 215.
[67]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 3.

Not just limited to setting up scenes where characters face cultural limits, Shakespeare's imagination allows him to further engage with his culture and contemplate alternatives by dramatically staging new, potentially dangerous, situations in the relative safety of the zone of the theatre. Staging is a powerful way to lay bare the contradictions that are inherent to the ideologies of a given culture. When Shakespeare, for instance, wanted to contemplate and disclose certain contradictions of the Jacobean monarchical system in *Coriolanus* he set his scene in the past and turned to the politics of antiquity "precisely because they enabled him to think outside a monarchical system in which all power flowed (or at least was said to flow) from the king".[68] So too Marlowe, hoping to reveal and reflect upon the behaviour of his fellow countrymen, did not stage his play in contemporary Elizabethan Britain but turned to the rise of the fourteenth-century Timurid empire as a metaphor in *Tamburlaine the Great*.[69]

Throughout Greenblatt's analyses it becomes clear that, to him, literature is the most adequate medium that has the ability to reveal the contradictions that are inherent to the ideologies of a given culture.[70] This in no way implies that these texts are somehow free from these cultural contradictions and thus immune from their destructive force. Rather, Greenblatt takes great pain to show that most of these texts and their writers still fall prey to these contradictions. What it does mean, however, is that fiction can be employed as a powerful device for exploring cultural limits, revealing ideological contradictions and obtaining a specific cultural insight, ranking literary authors among the most powerful agents of a given culture.

The Unique Insight of Shakespeare: We are Condemned to be Free

The existentialist conceptualisation of literature as action by disclosure and the medium's unique revelatory power offer us valuable insights in the status of literature in Greenblatt's new historicist practice, but they do not yet satisfyingly explain the particular amount of freedom that Shakespeare, and Shakespeare alone, could achieve. Part of that answer is clearly that he as a writer is able to disclose particular aspects of his culture and, from that disclosure, gain a certain amount of freedom which others—non-writers—find impossible to achieve. But Shakespeare was of course not the only writer of his time. He shares that powerful medium with contemporary writers such as Thomas Middleton or John Webster, whom Greenblatt does not consider to be epitomes of human freedom. The difference between Shakespeare and his colleagues lies elsewhere: in his unique cultural insight and the subsequent treatment of his material, resulting in a successful self-fashioning attempt which highly resembles the existentialist *condition humaine*.

[68]Ibid., 107.
[69]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 194.
[70]Ibid., 8.

Throughout *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* it becomes clear that it is extremely difficult to succeed in self-fashioning. The term, as one of us explained elsewhere,[71] is a word that can be pronounced in either of two ways, depending on which part of the word we stress. If we talk about self-*fashioning*, then the term refers to the way in which selves (subjects) are being fashioned in a set of external circumstances, by determinants that lie outside the self; if we talk about *self*-fashioning, then we are talking about the way in which and the extent to which one of the determinants in the fashioning of the self is the self itself. Greenblatt painstakingly stresses that subjectivity is not an autonomous entity but, just like any literary text, a cultural artefact shaped by many cultural codes and constraints. He consequently envisions the concept of self-fashioning to consist of an inseparable intertwinement of both "fashioning oneself and being fashioned by cultural institutions".[72] Failure to see this entwinement by overestimating the self as determinant and stubbornly refuting the external determinations only leads to an unsuccessful self-fashioning. This seems to be exactly the problem with most of the attempts at self-fashioning that Greenblatt deals with in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. In her analysis of that book, Belsey remarks that all self-fashioning acts lead to a failure, as most authors transgress the constraints set out by cultural norms because they mistakenly cling to the idea that the self is the sole origin of their subjectivity.[73] The result is that "More is executed, Tyndale chooses exile, Wyatt ends up talking, in effect, to himself. Marlowe and Spenser were both in their antithetical ways disappointed. Only Shakespeare, who managed to keep his opinions to himself, can be said to have succeeded in what he set out to do."[74] Shakespeare was the only one of the six authors who succeeded in self-fashioning and therefore seems to be an exception in Greenblatt's book. Yet he could only achieve that exceptional status by deliberately not voicing any subversive thoughts, keeping his mouth shut and accepting the active cultural constraints he had revealed in his imaginative art. Although Belsey seems to suggest that this kind of self-fashioning is in effect powerless, it is precisely this particular effect on others that makes Shakespeare according to Greenblatt such a powerful agent and even the embodiment of human freedom.

Shakespeare derives his exceptional position from the fact that, unlike More, Tyndale, Wyatt, Spenser and Marlowe, he seems to understand that self-fashioning is a process which does not only begin from the self, but is at the same time inevitably shaped by constraining external circumstances. More than any of his contemporaries he had a special insight in his cultural moment and the confronting recognition that escaping the determining forces of the ideologico-cultural framework is simply impossible—despite any hopes of absolute human freedom he might have had.[75] After all, according to Greenblatt, Shakespeare had already revealed in *Coriolanus*

[71]Pieters, 42–3.
[72]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 256.
[73]Belsey, "Historicizing New Historicism," 44.
[74]Ibid., 43.
[75]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 106.

that a status of absolute freedom is impossible to obtain for humans, because they are inextricably bound to determining socio-cultural relations from which there is no escape, despite the Roman warlord's valiant attempts.[76] In that play, the banished Coriolanus declares himself independent from the laws of the Roman people and goes to war against the Roman republic. Although he is frequently solicited by emissaries to accept a ceasefire truce, he remains unmoved by their appeals, refusing to acknowledge any ties of kinship with his former countrymen in the hopes of attaining absolute autonomy.[77] That status, however, is but a noble dream. When his mother comes begging to lay down his arms and surrender to the republic, Coriolanus collapses at the sight of her weeping. He surrenders to the republic, is brought to trial and eventually put to death. From the way Greenblatt interprets *Coriolanus* it is hard to refrain from considering Shakespeare as an author who fully grasped that openly transgressing and rebelling against cultural determinations is bound to fail and that there is nothing else to do than to recognise these constraints on human freedom.

Is this truly what gives Shakespeare his particular freedom, we might ask? Surely, this can't be it? How can acceptance of the forces that limit our human condition mean freedom? Does such an outlook on life not imply that we resign to fate, give up the possibility of resistance and human agency altogether and regard life as a determined living hell, abandoning all hope once we've entered it? After all, acceptance of the cultural constraints could equally mean consenting to their further existence and thus reinforcing the determining power they have on subjects. Yet, this is precisely what Greenblatt sees Shakespeare to be doing in his plays: "driven by a compelling vision of individuality, Shakespeare finds beauty in the singular, confronts the hatred aroused by otherness, explores the ethical perplexities of power, and acknowledges the limits to his own freedom".[78] This conscious acknowledgement is the typical existentialist human condition which Kernan summarises in his autobiography: "true existence, full consciousness and humanity, came only from accepting the radical and painful freedom that recognition of our absurd condition forces upon us".[79] Recognising the limits to our freedom is a painful, but also liberating action, as it paves the path to a successful act of self-fashioning. After all, to succeed in self-fashioning and reach a status of relative freedom, Greenblatt stresses that, it is important that a subject firstly acknowledges the cultural constraints working on him, secondly accommodates himself to these constraints, and lastly appropriates and bends them into his own scenario in an attempt to fashion his self to the fullest extent allowed by the ideologico-cultural framework in force.[80] This is what he has in mind when he argues that the limits Shakespeare disclosed and acknowledged ended up serving as the condition upon which his particular freedom is based.[81]

[76]Ibid., 111.
[77]Ibid., 110.
[78]Ibid., 6.
[79]Kernan, 98–9.
[80]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 227.
[81]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 1.

According to Greenblatt, Shakespeare in theory would have agreed with Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* which argues in favour of unbounded artistic freedom because it considers poetry as being independent from the laws governing daily life and thus radically free.[82] In practice, however, Shakespeare was self-conscious enough to realise that "some form of subjection is the inescapable human condition",[83] that his art was therefore not radically free and that his ability to seemingly say, express or explore anything he liked—a freedom which literary theorists like Sidney specifically attributed to great poets and playwrights—was in fact nothing more than a privilege allowed by "a social agreement, a willingness on the part of the elite ... to permit it to exist and to exist without crushing, constant interference".[84] Throughout *Shakespeare's Freedom* it becomes clear that according to Greenblatt Shakespeare had an extraordinary insight in the nature of his medium's specific power and the risks his métier entailed. This insight is the reason why he, unlike many of his fellow playwrights, was never incarcerated as a result of his writing.[85] It also made it easier for him to acknowledge and accept the limits on his career as a playwright, because he knew that instead of muzzling him, this social agreement would, on the contrary, enable him to speak out. The reason is that one of the conditions of that social agreement is the belief that theatre, and art in general, is innocent, harmless entertainment, precisely because—as Sidney's *Defense of Poetry* was claiming—it is considered to be radically detached from society and devoid of any practical significance. This belief makes aesthetic autonomy possible, as it allows Shakespeare to speak out and voice his opinions in his plays which in the end, according to Greenblatt, ended up making his imaginative art "powerful—and at least partially shielded from intervention—precisely because the audience believes that is nonfunctional, nonuseful, and hence nonpractical".[86] Greenblatt states that the audience may have believed in the inconsequentiality and harmlessness of literature, but Shakespeare knew otherwise. Although he kept implying that his plays had no practical significance whatsoever, he knew that it was a lie. Or he at least wanted to believe so.

Sidney's views of art as a radically free practice, allowing the artist to represent the world as he pleases and imaginatively leave that world behind in the quest of leading himself and his readers towards redemption, gave Shakespeare absolutely no hope.[87] His hope lies in the power of the imagination to change this world, not to leave it behind. For this to happen, imaginative literature—and art in general—cannot and may never be radically free. After all, didn't Sartre write that any author who wants to change the world and obtain freedom will have to produce a kind of *committed*

[82]Ibid., 115–17.
[83]Ibid., 112.
[84]Ibid., 120.
[85]Ibid., 14, 121.
[86]Ibid., 121.
[87]Ibid., 117.

literature that does not sever its ties with society but affirms them and reflects upon them in order to change them?[88]

This commitment of literature as a necessity in order to change the world is based upon his prior conceptualisation of the imagination. According to Sartre, authors and theoreticians—such as Sidney—who believe in literature's ability to be socially independent and thus able to realise absolute creation take up an extremist position and conceive the imagination "comme faculté inconditionnée de *nier* le réel".[89] This denial of the real—which Sartre discerns in the nineteenth-century French symbolist movement—cannot lead to revolution or change, he argues, but only to works of art expressing nothing but nothingness. The reason is quite simple: if literature were detached from the laws governing daily life, it would be unable to affect daily situations, render any attempts of change obsolete and simply be devoid of meaning. For how can it change society, if it has nothing to do with it? Sartre therefore takes up a different position, arguing that literature must always be engaged. Literature according to him is indeed aesthetically autonomous, appeals to the imaginative use of language and thus able to reflect upon a society and think of alternatives, not by *denying* the current world, but by *negating* it. The difference is crucial, because whereas denial implies a radical detachment from or collapse of the real,[90] the concept of negation more firmly grounds the imaginary in the real: "[U]ne image, étant négation du monde d'un point de vue particulier, ne peut jamais paraître que *sur fond de monde* et en liaison avec le fond. ... c'est ... cet « être-dans-le-monde » qui est la condition nécessaire de l'imagination."[91] The imagination is a function of subjects' being-in-the-world and depends upon the real as its very condition of possibility. Similarly, this is why Greenblatt's Shakespeare rejects claims of radical artistic freedom. In his view, the artist and his works may be aesthetically autonomous, but that autonomy is certainly not radical and only possible because of concrete social and cultural conditions. Understanding all of this, Shakespeare does not deny, but willingly accepts the conditions of the social agreement,[92] because this allows him to conceive literature, in spite of its claims of being precisely the opposite, as an inexorably committed practice.

Shakespeare's freedom is the freedom that results from his belief in the specific ability to make use of the power of the imagination to change the world. From all we have been arguing so far, there are more than reasonable grounds to accept that Greenblatt's conceptualisation of imagination from the outset is based upon an existentialist use of the concept. Yet in his reading of the concept of power Greenblatt differs from existentialists. This is where Foucault enters the scene. Drawing upon a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power, Greenblatt assumes that power is not just

[88]Sartre, *Qu'est que la littérature?*, 29–30.
[89]Ibid., 162.
[90]Ibid., 136.
[91]Sartre, *L'Imaginaire*, 235–6.
[92]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 120.

repressive and constraining subjectivity, but also productive in allowing the creation of new forms of behaviour.[93] Foucault considers subjects not as being passively incarcerated in fixed relations of power, but as being able to actively perform power to influence adaptable networks of power, albeit within the constraining framework delineated by their ideology.[94] Far from being a leisure activity that lies outside the reaches of power, literature in Greenblatt's new historicism is an extremely powerful medium which is able to effect changes in a society but not in a radical way. To change a culture's norms, it is important that the suggested change is not regarded as radical subversion. Greenblatt painstakingly makes clear that such a transgressive action is bound to fail, as institutions constrain their subjects by rewarding acceptable behaviour and repressing transgression.[95] Furthermore, because discourse in Greenblatt's practice is marked by a logic of "self-validating circularity",[96] radical subversive messages of individual discursive formations are easily nullified and incorporated by the dominant discourse, consolidating the status quo.

The paradox of Shakespeare's freedom is that, in the words of Greenblatt that we already quoted in the opening section of this article, he "approaches his culture not, like Marlowe, as rebel and blasphemer, but rather *as dutiful servant*, content to improvise a part of his own within its orthodoxy".[97] This servile approach to culture makes Shakespeare, paradoxically at first, precisely the epitome of human freedom. The author of *Macbeth* seemingly keeps his opinions to himself which might make him seem powerless as compared to Marlowe and his will to absolute play,[98] but in reality this allows him to reach an unheard status of freedom, at once embracing his cultural norms and slightly subverting them.[99] After all, to be successfully subversive an author cannot seem to be openly rebelling but use his specific cultural insight to not go against the grain, but with the current. Greenblatt argues that Shakespeare was a master at subordinating the subversive message of his plays to the delighting purpose of theatre.[100] This refined subordination then makes Shakespeare's plays particularly powerful, as it creates the illusion that his theatre is but a delighting and harmless practice with no influence on society whatsoever. The paradoxical result, however, is that it can have more impact on the audience and society than political treatises or pamphlets, whose goal of societal change may be overtly clear to their readers and therefore miss their desired effect. Shakespeare is successfully subversive and able to

[93]See Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, 64–5; Foucault, "Pouvoir et corps," 757.
[94]Mills, 33–5.
[95]Greenblatt, "Culture," 225–6.
[96]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 36.
[97]Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 253 (our emphasis).
[98]See ibid., 193–221.
[99]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 15.
[100]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 135. The influence that a work of art has on a society is according to Greenblatt measured by the amount of interest or pleasure it generates (Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," 157–8). Simply put: the more the audience of *The Globe* amused itself, the more the plays' ideas could seep into the unconsciousness of the spectators.

change cultural norms because as a writer he appropriates the dominant cultural discourse, slightly alters its form—by reworking it in, for instance, a piece of theatre—in this new form offers it to the public—the audience of the Globe for one—and thus returns it to society.[101]

Resonating Foucault's statements on power, in Greenblatt's new historicism nothing in a society, not even something considered to be powerless such as literature, is outside power.[102] Shakespeare wields the medium of literature as a Foucauldian productive device of power to slightly influence and reshape certain cultural norms. His servile approach and active willingness to accept his cultural norms, is not a submission—perhaps only in name[103]—to these norms, but a creative choice. This becomes clear when Greenblatt describes how Shakespeare was able to elaborate individual heroines who are all characteristically beautiful, in spite of the prevailing convention celebrating featureless as the ideal of beauty:

> Shakespeare understood his art to be dependent upon a social agreement, but he did not simply submit to the norms of his age. Rather ... he at once embraced those norms and subverted them, finding an unexpected, paradoxical beauty in the smudges, marks, stains, scars, and wrinkles that had figured only as signs of ugliness and difference.[104]

The innovative ideal of beauty as marked by individual bodily imperfections that Shakespeare propagates is a departure from the conventional norms of beauty to those of ugliness, shifting both norms' boundaries.[105] Greenblatt's reading of the way Shakespeare treats his material is a reading in which the author firstly self-consciously accepts the active cultural constraints, then applies, appropriates and bends them to his own advantage. Not by radically departing from the cultural constraints, but by slightly swerving away from them, does he push the boundaries further one step at a time in the hope of succeeding at obtaining a status of freedom unheard of in his age.

It is not hard to read Greenblatt's Shakespeare as an allegory of the existentialist hero Sisyphus, whom Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) made the existentialist hero par excellence.[106] Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to ceaselessly push a boulder to the top of a hill, sees his work made undone time and time again, as the boulder is destined to roll off the hill back to the plains of Tartarus. What makes his situation tragic is that he is fully conscious of the extent of his miserable condition and his futile attempt to reach the summit.[107] Sisyphus, however, does not lose hope. Instead of trying to escape the depths of Tartarus—which is as futile an

[101]Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 159.
[102]Lentricchia, 234–5.
[103]See Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), 254.
[104]Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, 15.
[105]Ibid., 42–3.
[106]Camus.
[107]Ibid., 165.

attempt as his effort to push the boulder up the hill—he tragically decides to obey the rules the gods have set upon him. As such he will never reach absolute freedom. Yet he continues to push the rock uphill, inch by inch, driven by the absurd hope that one day he will succeed and be free. Likewise, Shakespeare, with full consciousness, positively embraces the limits of his freedom and in doing so enables us to understand that our freedom is what it is on account of these limits, not despite them, as Sartre suggests in the motto that features above this article. This enables us, like Sisyphus, to live in good faith. Although Shakespeare had sufficient cultural insight to see that the external determinations of the social agreement are an important regulatory factor in his life, he does not merely submit to his cultural norms and deny human freedom. That would be a failure to confront reality and an act of bad faith.[108] He believes in his own agency, takes up responsibility for his own actions and paves his own path towards a successful self-fashioning, embodying human freedom—the freedom of one who has known all along that it will not be entirely his to choose.

References

Althusser, Louis. "Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d'état (notes pour une recherche)." In *Positions (1964–1975)*, edited by Louis Althusser. Paris: Éditions Sociales, 1976.

Belsey, Catherine. "Historicizing New Historicism." In *Presentist Shakespeares*, edited by Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes. London: Routledge, 2007.

——. *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden. The Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999.

Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998.

Camus, Albert. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe: Essai sur l'absurde*. Paris: Gallimard, 1942.

Cotkin, George. *Existential America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Cox, Gary. *Sartre and Fiction*. London: Continuum, 2009.

Culler, Jonathan. *A Very Short Introduction to Literary Theory*. 2d ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Dzelzainis, Martin. "Milton, Foucault, and the New Historicism." In *Rethinking Historicism From Shakespeare to Milton*, edited by Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Anniversary ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité: la volonté de savoir*. Vol. 1, *Bibliothèque des histoires*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

——. *L'Ordre du discours: leçon inaugurale au Collège de France prononcée le 2 décembre 1970*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

——. "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, edited by Paul Rabinow. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984. New York, NY: New Press of New York, 1997.

——. "Pouvoir et corps." In *Dits et écrits*, edited by Michel Foucault, Daniel Defert, and François Ewald. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

——. *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.

[108]See Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, 81–5; and Cox, 43.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "Literary Criticism and the Politics of New Historicism." In *The New Historicism*, edited by Harold Aram Veeser. London: Routledge, 1989.
Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
Geldof, Koen. *Kritische Profielen: Opstellen Over Politieke Filosofie, Esthetiek en (Franse) Literatuur*. Leuven: Peeters, 1999.
Graff, Gerald. "Co-Optation." In *The New Historicism*, edited by Harold Aram Veeser. London: Routledge, 1989.
Greenblatt, Stephen. "Culture." In *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
——. "Introduction." In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. London: Routledge, 1990.
——. "Laos is Open." *The Threepenny Review* 51 (1992): 20–3.
——. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
——. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Anniversary ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
——. *Shakespeare's Freedom*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
——. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988.
——. *Sir Walter Ralegh: The Renaissance Man and His Roles*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973.
——. *Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965.
——. "Towards a Poetics of Culture." In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt. London: Routledge, 1990.
——. "What is the History of Literature?" *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1997): 460–81.
Harman, Barbara L. "Refashioning the Renaissance." *Diacritics* 14, no. 1 (1984): 52–65.
Howard, Jean E. "The Cultural Construction of the Self in the Renaissance." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1983): 378–81.
Howells, Christina M. "Sartre and the Language of Literature." *The Modern Language Review* 74, no. 3 (1979): 572–9.
Kernan, Alvin. *In Plato's Cave*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999.
Lentricchia, Frank. "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?" In *The New Historicism*, edited by Harold Aram Veeser. London: Routledge, 1989.
Mills, Sara. *Michel Foucault*. Edited by Robert Eaglestone. Routledge Critical Thinkers. London: Routledge, 2003.
Moran, Dermot. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. London: Routledge, 2000.
Pieters, Jürgen. *Moments of Negotiation: The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001.
Robson, Mark. *Stephen Greenblatt*. Edited by Robert Eaglestone. Routledge Critical Thinkers. London: Routledge, 2008.
Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L'Être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943.
——. *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Nagel, 1946.
——. *L'Imaginaire: psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination*. Paris: Gallimard, 1940.
——. *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre: novembre 1939–mars 1940*. Paris: Gallimard, 1983.
——. *Qu'est que la littérature?* Paris: Gallimard, 1948.
——. "Sartre par Sartre." In *Situations IX*, edited by Jean-Paul Sartre. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
Stevens, Paul. "Pretending to be Real: Stephen Greenblatt and the Legacy of Popular Existentialism." *New Literary History* 33 (2002): 491–519.

Suhl, Benjamin. *Jean-Paul Sartre: The Philosopher as a Literary Critic*. London: Columbia University Press, 1970.

Veeser, Harold Aram, ed. *The New Historicism*. London: Routledge, 1989.

White, Hayden. "The Fictions of Factual Representation." In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, edited by Hayden White. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.