# Fashioning of the Self in the Historicisation of the Subject: The Foucauldian Legacy in Stephen Greenblatt's Work Revisited

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ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault's influence on Stephen Greenblatt is a subject that has apparently gone out of date. Paul Stevens argues that Greenblatt's attempt to fashion the self through narration is influenced by Sartrean existentialism. An examination of Greenblatt's work, however, will demonstrate that it is the Foucauldian notion of self-constitution of the subject that has provided the conceptual framework. Moreover, Greenblatt's conception of history is quite different from Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist history. In comparison with Sartre, Greenblatt puts more emphasis on impersonal forces and remains deeply sceptical of the Sartrean notion of absolute freedom in our actions. The fear of the loss of identity, as a malaise of modernity, has led to Greenblatt's impulse to fashion his identity through narration and can only be addressed by a materialistic account of the origin of the human subject.

KEYWORDS: Stephen Greenblatt, self-constitution, the subject, historicisation, existentialist history

## INTRODUCTION

The critical movement known as New Historicism is characterised by its evident eclecticism and, on the other hand, its reluctance to clarify the intellectual sources that

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it has drawn on, which then inevitably becomes the subject of much debate and speculation. H. Aram Veeser believes that New Historicism wants to "forget its intellectual ancestors," as they are in a certain sense "shameful" figures.[1] Michel Foucault, for instance, is "condemned for hypostasizing power and denying that anyone could successfully resist it."[2] In *The New Historicism*, a 1989 collection of essays on this influential critical school, Foucault's possible influence on Stephen Greenblatt is often mentioned. The discomforting celebration of power, a recurrent motif in Greenblatt's work, is widely accepted as Foucault's most evident legacy in New Historicism. Such a view is exemplified in Jan R. Veenstra's remark that Greenblatt has been under the influence of the Foucauldian notion of "strategies and operations of power in discourse."[3] Since the advent of the new century, however, this seemingly innate link between Foucault and Greenblatt has been questioned from various perspectives.[4] Paul Stevens is among the first to suggest that Foucault's influence on Greenblatt has been remarkably overestimated. Stevens observes in his essay[5] that "the overall pattern" of Stephen Greenblatt's career "has a lot more to do with popular Sartre than rigorously studied Foucault"[6]—a remark almost as striking as Michel Foucault's oft-cited definition of man as a recent invention.[7] Stevens's argument that Greenblatt is the existentialist hero rather than the poststructuralist devil, as he has been often supposed to be, demonstrates how determined he is to think against the current. The commonly held view that Foucault is the major intellectual source of Greenblatt's work is for Stevens simply a misconception that has long been taken for granted. The conception of power as omnipresent and omnipotent and the anti-humanist notion of subjectivity, regarded as Foucault's most substantial contributions to the contemporary intellectual world, have served as the theoretical framework for Greenblatt's work according to many scholars' readings of the New Historicism.[8] The postmodern impulse to efface human subjectivity, which has dominated Greenblatt's whole project as literary scholars tend to believe, is now eclipsed by his existentialist struggle for identity in Stevens's fresh examination of Greenblatt's oeuvre.

By virtue of the fact that no direct questioning of the Sartrean legacy in Greenblatt has yet appeared, Stevens's reading remains valid and continues to bedevil students of New Historicism in assessing Greenblatt's essential notion of self-fashioning.[9] Ironically, Stevens's self-proclaimed correction of the misconception that Foucault has a greater influence on Greenblatt than other theorists is apparently based on a conviction shared by many American literary scholars: as one of the foremost

representatives of poststructuralism, Foucault is known mainly for his anti-humanist notion of subjectivity in which identity, agency and the individual subject are considered modern illusions. In such an account, the complex image of the French thinker is reduced to a poststructuralist devil who aims at a complete effacement of subjectivity. Put crudely, Stevens's criticism of the popular reading of New Historicism actually builds on the presupposition that the essence of that reading is correct—he has at least partly embraced what he aims to deny. Stevens's knowledge of Foucault, as is manifested in the essay, seems to be limited to the latter's arguments in *Discipline and Punish*, and the two works written at his archaeological moment, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and "What is an Author?" The ethical turn in Foucault's later work is evidently not in the picture.

Considering that Geoffrey Galt Harpham[10] as early as 1991 pointed out that Foucault's exploration of self-government is his "essential" yet "entirely unacknowledged" contribution to New Historicism,[11] Stevens's utter exclusion of the later Foucault can hardly be justified. Harpham's account of the debate on historicism is, to be sure, another correction of the misconception of Foucault's influence on Greenblatt that was circulating within American literary circles in the 1980s. This correction, however, is characterised by a different perspective. By taking into account Foucault's later works such as the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Harpham problematised the commonly shared conception of Foucault as a poststructuralist deconstructor of subjectivity. Foucault's contribution to New Historicism is no longer limited to the study of power and the effacement of agency—it now extends to the exploration of self-government in his later work. Failing to draw the attention that it deserves, Harpham's correction remained ignored by Stevens, who stuck with the 1980s conception of Foucault.

## FOUCAULT'S ETHICAL TURN AND GREENBLATT

The publication of Foucault's later texts, that is, the second and the third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, along with interviews and lectures that came to be published from the 1970s to the 1990s, has triggered a reexamination of Foucault's historical account of various modes by which "the human beings are made subjects."[12] Among the three modes that Foucault has listed, the third one, that is, "the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject,"[13] has captured the most attention by virtue of its

freshness for students of Foucault. Scholars have long written about the Foucauldian subject as a construct, a product of power, discourses and social practices alike: "In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production." [14] Since the 1980s such arguments have constituted the essence of American literary scholars' conception of Foucault. For many scholars, Foucault's hostility to subjectivity is explicit in "What is an Author?": "In writing, the point is. . . rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears."[15] Foucault's intention here, to be sure, cannot be reduced to the complete effacement of subjectivity—the structuralism, in its broader sense of both structuralism and poststructuralism, consists in the deconstruction of the subject as origin and the reconstruction of the subject as effect.[16] When Foucault states that we have to dispense with "the subject itself," the notion must be understood as "the constituent subject," a subject "transcendental in relation to the field of events,"[17] which the structuralists all have a problem with.

The conviction that the subject, like all other things, must be subordinated to the historical framework, has governed Foucault's work. The human subject à la Foucault is not a given, nor a transcendental signifier—it is rather made by discourses and practices and is conditioned by specific contexts: "the transcendental was historical."[18] The structuralist conception of the subject as effect, and more specifically the Foucauldian notion of the human subject as a product of social reality, however, seem to be explicitly dismissed in Foucault's later work. Students of philosophy and intellectual history have shown much interest in this prompt transformation, known as the ethical turn, and thus attempt to account for it. Arnold I. Davidson, for instance, remarks that "Foucault's study of ancient sexual behavior is guided or framed in terms of [Pierre] Hadot's notion of spiritual exercises."[19] As a scholar well versed in Hadot's work, Davidson must know that Foucault was, as Hadot has written, an "attentive reader of my works"[20] and seemed interested in some points touched on by Hadot in his article.[21] One of these points, "the description of ancient philosophy as an art, style or way of life,"[22] does indeed demonstrate the "basic convergence of interest that links their work."[23] There are, however, important differences of perspective between the two French thinkers. Hadot's conception of "spiritual exercises" as aiming to bring about "a profound transformation of the individual's mode of being and seeing"[24] is distinct

from the Foucauldian notion of the "art of existence," which apparently puts a special emphasis on the aesthetic dimension.[25]

In addition to Hadot, Paul Veyne, the historian of ancient Rome, is also supposed to have influenced Foucault, who did not hesitate to state that Veyne had given him "constant assistance."[26] The turn towards ethics, however, cannot be accounted for by simply referring to some scholars who guided Foucault's project in one way or another, without considering the inner logic of the development of Foucault's thought. Foucault traced the trajectory of his later project in his summaries of courses at the Collège de France: "This year's course drew support from the analyses done the preceding years on the subject of 'government,' this notion being understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior."[27] Foucault's exploration of the government of others, which is closely related to his notion of power as technology, led him to enter into the study of the government of the self in his last works. As Fabian Heubel insightfully points out, "it is the notion of government which allows him to transform it from research centered around questions of power into research centered around ethics."[28] To use Foucault's own words, the object of his inquiry proceeded from the second mode of objectification of the subject, that is, "dividing practices," to the third mode—"how a human being turns him- or herself into a subject."[29]

It is a misconception to assume, however, that Foucault's transformation was abrupt and complete and that his exploration of the third mode was in contradiction to his study of the second mode. For how can the subject, which, as a product of power, is so passive and denied of all autonomy, now come to be considered as the goal of self-techniques? How can individuals turn themselves into subjects by means of self-practices (*practiques de soi*) if they are merely effects of power? In fact, in Foucault's earlier works such as *Discipline and Punish*, the human subject is conceived as both vehicle and effect of power: "The prison is not a workshop, it is, it must be of itself, a machine whose convict-workers are both the cogs and products."[30] In other words, individuals "are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power."[31] Implied in such remarks is a notion of the subject as an organic element rather than what Foucault calls the "vis-à-vis" of power.[32] The binary division of society into structure and subject,[33] in which one is always struggling for mastery over the other, is problematised by Foucault's work. Thus, Frank Lentricchia's charge that New Historicism reduces "the self" to a "product of forces over which we exercise no

control"[34] only indicates the extent to which he has fallen prey to oversimplification of the structural analysis of social reality. Even in his earlier works Foucault never completely denied that subjects can exercise some control over themselves. Indeed, government, which involves one's exercising multiple techniques, is a better term than control in presenting a critical examination of Foucault's work. The government of others is linked to the government of the self as the latter is also an "intensification of social relations": after all, one has to seek advice from others in the practice of the care of the self.[35]

The notion of the cultivation of the self, with all its variants such as the care of the self, the technologies of the self and practices of the self, links Foucault's work with Greenblatt's. Greenblatt's well-known notion of self-fashioning, poised between free choice and complete denial of autonomy, owes an evident debt to Foucault. Martin Dzelzainis argues that Greenblatt's conception of self-fashioning is in contrast with Foucault's in that the latter places a greater emphasis on autonomy whereas the former seeks to demonstrate that self-fashioning is only about the self "as fashioned by others."[36] The argument sounds far from convincing as Dzelzainis apparently fails to take into account the fact that for both Greenblatt and Foucault the fashioning of self involves autonomy and politico-cultural domination at the same time—Greenblatt's conception of "fashioning oneself" and "being fashioned by cultural institutions" as "inseparably intertwined" can be most easily related to the Foucauldian notion of government of the self and government of others. More importantly, Foucault[37] himself also recognises an "interesting analysis" of the "aesthetics of existence" in Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The shift of focus as evidenced in the later Foucault is anything but as absolute as Dzelzainis takes it to be—it must be noted that for Foucault the "care of self" constituted a "true social practice" that "often took form within more or less institutionalised structures."[38] It is simply a myth that the later Foucault turns his back on the techniques of power and domination and only concentrates on autonomy.

## FASHIONING OF THE SELF: A SARTREAN OR FOUCAULDIAN PROJECT?

While Greenblatt's indebtedness to Foucault remains identifiable, Stevens is determined to establish a link between the concept of self-fashioning and Sartre's conception of existence as preceding essence: "Experience, especially the experience of

telling and being told stories, precedes identity."[39] Indeed, Greenblatt's "sense of identity as intertwined with narratives of the self and its doubles"[40] is reminiscent of Sartre's existentialist search for authenticity and identity. Human subjects are not blessed with any essence, so they have to attain an identity through their actions. An important dimension of Sartre's conception of the self is, however, utterly ignored by Stevens and his followers.[41] The emphasis on self-choice, Jürgen Habermas's notion of "Selbstwahl,"[42] for all its importance for the existentialists, is obviously not taken into account in Stevens's study of Greenblatt's work. Sartre is convinced that existentialism is characterised by its optimism: "What the existentialist says is that the coward makes himself cowardly and the hero makes himself heroic."[43] What comes to the fore in this remark is the responsibility for one's life[44] and the conception of identity as based on self-choice. One only becomes what one makes of oneself. In light of this examination of the existentialist notion of identity, Greenblatt's account of his struggle between being and nothingness in the preface to *Learning to Curse*, a story of one's identity fashioned by narratives, can be interpreted from a perspective quite different from Stevens's.

In the same preface, Greenblatt reports: "I have been unpersuaded by arguments that the self has been radically deconstructed—but it does help one see more clearly where in the world one's identity comes from and what kinds of negotiation and conflict it entails."[45] So where exactly does the identity come from? Greenblatt gives a possible answer immediately afterwards when he states that his project is situated at the level of "the cultural identity fashioned in and by English literature."[46] And for Greenblatt, literature has to be understood as "a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture."[47] When Greenblatt speaks for narratives' contribution to the fashioning of self, he has apparently in mind literature as discourses, to use a Foucauldian term, rather than as an act of disclosure.[48] Unfortunately—at least for Stevens and his followers—Greenblatt's existentialist moment, where he seems to argue that the self can be fashioned by means of telling stories, does not last more than several pages. If this moment does exist, it is only eclipsed by Greenblatt's strong determination to appropriate the Foucauldian model of accounting for the formation of identity in the essays collected in this volume. The seemingly existentialist tone that Greenblatt strikes in the short autobiography appears simply too transient.

For Stevens, Greenblatt's determination to "abjure and exorcize his Foucauldian moment" is explicit in his impulse to fashion his self by means of

narratives—the image of Foucault here is still the poststructuralist devil in favour of the effacement of identity. Greenblatt's works such as *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* present his examination of the contribution of writing to self-fashioning. Greenblatt has borrowed from Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as "a set of control mechanisms"[49] and proceeds to state that self-fashioning is "the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms," the "cultural system of meanings" that creates individuals, in which literature functions as "the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped."[50] Self-fashioning à la Greenblatt, then, is at least guided by social rules and instructions. Vandeviver and Pieters are thus convinced that Greenblatt's argument is that human subjects "make use of different practices and techniques which are proposed, suggested and even imposed by the culture they are embedded in" to fashion themselves and that among these techniques, "perhaps the most important one" is narration.[51] This privilege of narration is considered to reveal the power of literature as disclosure, a conviction that Greenblatt shares with Sartre.[52] For Stevens as well as for Vandeviver and Pieters, Greenblatt's notion of self-fashioning through narration implies that he is still under the influence of Sartrean existentialism.[53] Self-fashioning, then, is for Greenblatt more than just an object under scholarly examination—it is related to his deep-rooted fear of identity-loss. In exploring the concept of self-fashioning, Greenblatt is "not only trying to understand identity but perform it."[54]

Stevens maintains that Greenblatt's exploration of self-fashioning constitutes a rejection of Foucault, whose notion of *écriture* has as its goal the effacement of the writer's identity.[55] The mention of self-fashioning through writing, however, is also found in Foucault's work. In a later text of Foucault's, the author, maybe quite surprisingly for Stevens, now touches on the subject of formation of identity through writing: "Through the interplay of selected readings and assimilative writing, one should be able to form an identity through which a whole spiritual genealogy can be read."[56] In ancient Greco-Roman culture, writing was supposed to constitute one's soul, on which his or her identity was based. For Foucault, writing is one of those practices of the self, "for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self."[57] More importantly, for Foucault writing as practices of the self is not merely a concept in ancient culture—it has virtually become a firm belief of his: "During the last eight months of his life, the writing of his two books played the role for him that philosophical writing and the personal journal played in ancient philosophy: that of a work of the self on the self, a self-stylization."[58]

Self-fashioning through writing is thus far from an exclusive Sartrean notion, and in fact it was greatly influenced by Foucault. As Vandeviver and Pieters point out, the practices and techniques that subjects make use of to fashion themselves are "proposed, suggested and even imposed by the culture they are embedded in."[59] In other words, the fashioning of the self is not an act of purely free choice—rather, it has to conform to social instructions. The existentialist optimism, the "absolute freedom of choice,"[60] is missing in Greenblatt's account of self-fashioning. For Foucault, the "techniques of the self" are "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge."[61] One can hardly overlook the similarities between Greenblatt's and Foucault's conceptions here, for both tend to see self-fashioning as practices of the self that are to a considerable extent influenced by forces from outside.

Stevens takes the existentialist impulse to constitute identity in the face of the threat posed by its loss as the unfailing impetus for Greenblatt's career. The "new historicist theorist" is "simply one of the many roles that that self-fashioning, humanist hero happened to adopt."[62] At times Greenblatt is trying hard to wrestle with Foucault's influence on him. In Stevens's reading of Greenblatt's work, Foucault appears appealing only when the new historicist critic finds himself haunted by the problem of nothingness. Thus, the effacement of identity by discourse, a recurrent theme in Greenblatt's earlier works, must not be seen as the transcendence of existentialism, but "merely the passing triumph of one of its poles"[63]—the triumph of nothingness. In other words, the Foucauldian motives in Greenblatt's work are in effect subordinated to the existentialist project of the exploration of being and nothingness. In the 1988 version of Greenblatt's important essay "Invisible Bullets," his remarks on the "possibility of identity-producing agency" clearly indicate that "his Foucauldian moment has passed."[64] In later works such as *Marvelous Possessions* and *Hamlet's Purgatory*, the existentialist, identity-producing power of storytelling has apparently been restored.

Implicit in Stevens's remarks is the argument that the appropriation of Foucault is but an interlude in Greenblatt's life-long existentialist struggle between being and nothingness—when nothingness seems to have the upper hand, Foucault is there to provide the much-desired access to total effacement of identity, the state of virtual nothingness. To be sure, one can hardly decide whether Stevens's argument is

justified without recourse to a careful examination of Greenblatt's work. In response to the criticism that new historicism seems too subjective, Greenblatt remarks in an interview that remains little known to Western intellectuals that "the whole point of New Historicism is to call into question and to historicize the subject."[65] As Greenblatt states in the introduction to *Learning to Curse*, he simply wants to "see where in the world one's identity comes from and what kinds of negotiation and conflicts it entails." [66] Apparently, the point here is not so much the effacement as the historicisation of the subject. In line with Foucault, Greenblatt also maintains that the origin of identity lies not in the essence of human nature but in social reality, which in this context consists of practices and discourses.

Nowhere more clearly than in "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture," a less often discussed text of Greenblatt's, has he stated that identity is a product of social discourses and practices rather than biologically determined. He draws on the compelling story of Martin Guerre, who returns to his hometown only to see his wife living with another man who claims to be the real Martin but then turns out to be merely an impostor.[67] The point of the story, according to Greenblatt's interpretation, is that our identity originates not in "the fixity, the certainty, of our own body."[68] Subjectivity, as Martin's story demonstrates, is far from the source of our actions and practices—it is rather determined by them. Greenblatt comes to the striking conclusion that Martin's subjectivity is "the product of the relations, material objects, and judgments exposed in the case rather than the producer of these relations, objects and judgments."[69] To be more specific, one's identity lies not in one's body, but in a network of social relations. For Greenblatt, any attempt to interpret Renaissance texts with psychoanalytical theories obviously falls prey to a misconception of historical reality, as these theories have privileged the consciousness of identity in explaining actions and practices in the Renaissance, which have virtually produced our consciousness of identity. The "psychological categories" are the "results" rather than "the causes of the very phenomena" found in the texts.[70]

It becomes now apparent that for Greenblatt, identity is a social construct with its own historicity, thus psychoanalysis can redeem its belatedness "only when it historicizes its own procedures."[71] In fact, any attempt to consider the question of identity must take into account its historicity, which is complex and resists all kinds of oversimplifications. The "unitary vision" in which identity is conceived as a given, a "stable point of reference," can only be achieved by "repressing histories—multiple,

complex, refractory stories."[72] Indeed, for Greenblatt, the sense of the self that we have now "rests upon a complex technology of control whose origins we trace back to the Renaissance."[73] As the case of Martin Guerre shows, the legal procedures and institutional decisions are apparently among the factors that have in effect produced the modern sense of the self. One can hardly think of a better way to free oneself from the misconception of identity as a given than through an experience with how this sense came into being.

As Foucault states in his now oft-cited lines, the goal of his work is to "create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."[74] To be sure, Foucault was aiming not merely to trace the history of how subjects are made, but in fact to replace a commonly trusted narrative with his own fresh account. For Foucault, "the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are,"[75] as the problem was to free us from the type of individualisation that is "linked to the state" and "has been imposed on us for several centuries."[76] The widely circulating narrative of individual liberation in the wake of Enlightenment was then deconstructed by Foucault. The seemingly disinterested analysis of historical events, which is seen as characteristic of Foucault, actually envisioned a liberation from imposed individualisation—a highly ambitious undertaking indeed. We must note here, for Martin Heidegger, Foucault's intellectual hero, "the essence of man" ("*das Wesen des Menschen*") is "threatened" in the long history of metaphysics.[77] With its evident emphasis on the "man," metaphysics utterly ignored the important question of the "essence of man." To restore the dignity of man, Heidegger thus proposed to think beyond Western metaphysics. Explicitly dismissed in Heidegger's work is the essentialist conception of the subject as possessing a "substantial self we can express and access," which is a "product of the 'metaphysics of presence'—hence a "theoretical construct."[78] For all the divergences between Foucault and Heidegger,[79] both thinkers see the dignity of the human compromised in the widely circulating grand narrative and thus they both attempt a liberation from it.

Now that Greenblatt has asserted his goal of historicising the subject, it becomes an important question whether this quasi-Foucauldian historicisation also serves some subjective purposes. For Greenblatt, after a rejection of both "the totalizing of a universal mythology" and "the radical particularizing of relativism," we are only left with "a network of lived narrated stories, practices, strategies, representations, fantasies, negotiations, and exchanges" that can fashion our experience of "the past, of

others, and of ourselves."[80] The fashioning of the self through narration, the seemingly Sartrean motif, appears again here. A careful examination of Greenblatt's historical account can, however, show that his history is quite distinct from the existentialist history à la Sartre. To begin with, Sartre's theory of history is characteried by its "search for the responsibility of the historical agent,"[81] whereas Greenblatt's emphasis is always on the impersonal forces—sexual discourse, for instance, "plays a critical role in the shaping of identity" by "helping to implant in each person a system of dispositions and orientations that governs individual improvisations." [82] Greenblatt apparently conceives individual agency as governed by, or subordinated to, a dominant mode of behaviour, which varies in the course of history. Iago's "improvisation," by which Greenblatt means "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario," is but a crucial "Renaissance mode of behavior"[83] rather than an outcome of personal choice.

In addition to the emphasis on impersonal forces, Greenblatt's motivation behind his narration can also shed some light on the question as to whether his is an existentialist history. In the two more recent works, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* and *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, Greenblatt presents a more complete account of how the modern consciousness of identity has come into being. As early as *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt showed much interest in this subject: "To experience Renaissance culture is to feel what it was like to form our own identity, and we are at once more rooted and more estranged by this experience."[84] Greenblatt's exploration of Renaissance culture thus aims at an account of the origin of the modern self, but evidently, what he has found there is simply "the same subject he/she already knows: a simulacrum of the poststructuralist self insecure in its identity."[85] What Greenblatt presents in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and still in some subsequent works seems limited to what it was like in the Renaissance alone—what lies beyond apparently interested him not so much. Now with *The Swerve* and *The Rise and Fall*, Greenblatt has finally made an attempt at centuries-spanning narratives. In both works Greenblatt's narration centres on how a single text continues to arouse curiosity and admiration in the long course of history and give rise to a great number of interpretations and criticisms alike.

*The Swerve*, as its subtitle suggests, presents an account of how the modern world came into being through a break with the medieval age. Greenblatt tells the story of how Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* was found by the Italian book hunter,

Poggio Bracciolini, after the book had been lost for more than fourteen hundred years. In Greenblatt's miraculous account, this is a book that "would help in time to dismantle his [Poggio Bracciolini's] entire world."[86] By promoting the extremely dangerous ideas of materialism, *On the Nature of Things* became an important source of the modern conception of the world. Greenblatt's argument is that the intellectual revolution triggered by this single book plays a role in the fashioning of identity, and the new historicist critic himself is a product of modern society. The autobiographical paragraphs in the preface demonstrate that this book had a formative influence on Greenblatt: "*On the Nature of Things* struck a very deep chord within me." [87] Greenblatt's materialistic stance and his aversion to Christianity can only be made possible by a "modern understanding of the world."[88] To be sure, Greenblatt's narration is driven by a curiosity to explore the origin of the modern self, to see how a modern individual is fashioned by history. "Our past is sedimented in our present," as Charles Taylor remarks, "and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can't do justice to where we come from."[89]

This impulse to know the origin of the self continues in *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*. From generation to generation, a great number of authors and thinkers alike have contributed to the interpretation or rewriting of the same text, that is, the story of Adam and Eve. In the wake of a series of scientific discoveries, the story is no longer held to be a faithful account of reality: "our understanding of human origins has been freed from the grip of a once-potent delusion." [90] The story, though in contradiction to the facts, continues to fascinate us by virtue of its unfailing power to provoke emotional response and rational thinking—it has "the life—the peculiar, intense, magical reality—of literature."[91] By contributing to the interpretation of the story, generations of authors have participated in the process of constituting a common cultural identity: "Just as an individual forms a personal identity through memory, maintaining this despite the passage of time, so a group identity is also dependent on the reproduction of shared memories."[92] The continuity that guarantees our identity rests on the interpretation of the same text, a tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation.

## CONCLUSION

With *The Swerve* and *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, Greenblatt has again practiced what he regards as the "whole point of New Historicism"—"to call into question and to historicize the subject." [93] In line with Sartre, Greenblatt is against essentialist humanism: "For it is not the biological nature of humans that determined their history, but their history—the choices they made and consequences of those choices—that determined their nature."[94] The important difference, however, is that Greenblatt never believes in the absolute freedom of choices: "We bear responsibility for our actions—we are not automata—but at the same time our freedom is severely constrained and compromised."[95] For Alan Liu, Greenblatt seeks to explore the Renaissance culture as he is "a subject looking into the past for some other subject able to define what he himself, or she herself, is."[96] The very fear of the possible loss of identity helps to account for Greenblatt's impulse to historicise the subject. The cause of this fear should not be limited to poststructuralism or Sartrean existentialism—Charles Taylor observes, "There is a generalized sense in our culture that with the eclipse of the transcendent, something may have been lost."[97] Living in a disenchanted world, we can hardly see the point of death as it no longer guarantees the access to the afterlife—the reunion with the family after death is unthinkable for many people in a secular world. The fear of death felt by Greenblatt's mother has troubled the son very much because he dreaded losing his mother.[98] *On the Nature of Things*, however, helps to get rid of Greenblatt's dread by instilling in him beliefs in the transitoriness of things we encounter in the world.[99] The fear of identity loss can, similarly, be addressed by historicising the subject: human identity, far from being a mysterious given, lies in the history only. In comparison with the Sartrean emphasis on the role of the historical agent, the Foucauldian belief that the self is a product of historical reality has evidently exerted a greater influence on Greenblatt's work. A materialistic account of the sources of the self suffices to ensure that we will not lose our identity so long as history continues to move on—in whichever direction.

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## NOTES

[1] H. Aram Veeser, "The New Historicism," in *The New Historicism Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jan R. Veenstra, "The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the Interpretation of Shakespeare," *History and Theory* 34, no. 3 (1995): 182.

[4] See Catherine Belsey, "Historicizing New Historicism," *Presentist Shakespeares*, ed. Hugh Grady and Terrence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 2007).

[5] Paul Stevens, "Pretending to be real: Stephen Greenblatt and the Legacy of Popular Existentialism," *New Literary History* 33, no. 3 (2002).

[6] Ibid., 500.

[7] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966), 398.

[8] See Frank Lentricchia, "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989); Walter Cohen, "Political Criticism of Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare Reproduced*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York and London: Methuen, 1987).

[9] We have to do Stevens justice in admitting that he has rightly pointed out that an exploration of the notion of self-fashioning does help to illuminate not only *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* but some other works of Greenblatt's as well.

[10] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Foucault and the New Historicism," *American Literary History* 2, no.3 (1991).

[11] Ibid., 372–73.

[12] Michel Foucault, "Subject and Power," in Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208.

[13] Ibid., 208.

[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 194.

[15] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 102.

[16] Étienne Balibar, "Le structuralisme: une destitution du sujet?" *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale,* no. 1 (2005): 15.

[17] Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977,* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 119.

[18] Paul Veyne, Catherine Porter, and Arnold I. Davidson, "The Final Foucault and his Ethics." *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 4.

[19] Arnold I. Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot," Critical Inquiry 16, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 480.

[20] Pierre Hadot, *Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987), 229. The English translation of Hadot's *Exercises spirituelles*, which I have also cited in this essay, includes some revisions that Hadot has made as well as some new essays written by Hadot in the wake of the publication of the French version, see Arnold I. Davidson's introduction in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

[21] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 206.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy", 481.

[24] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.

[25] For a more detailed study of the differences between Foucault and Hadot, see Fabien Heubel, "Self-Discovery or Self-Creation: On the Difference between Foucault's and Hadot's Conception of Self-Cultivation," in *Zaijian fuke: fuke wanqi sixiang yanjiu* (*To Meet Foucault Again: Study on the Later Foucault*), ed. Richard R-C Hwang (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2008).

[26] Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*. Vol. 2 of *The History of the Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley. 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 8.

[27] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subject and Truth*. Vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 81.

[28] Fabian Heubel, "Aesthetic Cultivation and Creative Ascesis: Transcultural Reflections on the Late Foucault," *Human Affairs* 27: 391.

[29] Foucault, "Subject and Power," 208.

[30] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 242.

[31] Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, 98.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 33.

[34] Lentricchia, "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?" 241.

[35] Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self.* Vol. 3 of *The History of the Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley. 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 53.

[36] Martin Dzelzainis, "Milton, Foucault, and the New Historicism," in *Rethinking Historicism from Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Ann Baynes Coiro and Thomas Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 215.

[37] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 11.

[38] Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 51.

[39] Stevens, "Pretending to be real", 500.

[40] Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 8.

[41] See Nicolas Vandeviver and Jürgen Pieters, "Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare: Stephen Greenblatt and the Existentialist Power of Literature," *English Studies* 96, no. 8 (2015).

[42] Jürgen Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019), 682.

[43] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 39.

[44] See Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 2, 686; Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 38.

[45] Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 11.

[46] Ibid., 12.

[47] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 4.

[48] See Vandeviver and Pieters, "Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare", 958.

[49] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York : Basic Books, 1973), 44.

[50] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 3–4.

[51] Vandeviver and Pieters, "Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare", 956.

[52] Ibid., 955–58.

[53] Vandeviver and Pieters's argument has its emphasis on the power of literature to disclose certain aspects of social reality and to set the author relatively free from it, while Stevens is more concerned with Greenblatt's struggle against the loss of identity, the much-feared nothingness (see Vandeviver and Pieters, 958–65; Stevens, 502–504).

[54] Stevens, "Pretending to be real", 499.

[55] Ibid., 504.

[56] Foucault, *Ethics: Subject and Truth*, 214.

[57] Ibid., 211.

[58] Veyne, Porter and Davidson, "The Final Foucault and his Ethics." 8.

[59] Vandeviver and Pieters, "Fashioning Freedom for Shakespeare", 956.

[60] Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, 43.

[61] Foucault, *Ethics: Subject and Truth*, p. 87.

[62] Stevens, "Pretending to be real", 500.

[63] Ibid., 507.

[64] Ibid., 508.

[65] Anfeng Sheng, "Penetrating Cultures and Reconstructing History: An Interview with Stephen Greenblatt," *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies* 351, no. 3 (2010): 3.

[66] Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 11.

[67] For an outline of Martin Guerre's story, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), vii.

[68] Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, 186.

[69] Ibid., 184.

[70] Ibid., 191.

[71] Ibid., 191.

[72] Ibid., 185–86.

[73] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 174.

[74] Foucault, "Subject and Power," 208.

[75] Ibid., 216.

[76] Ibid., 216. Foucault argues that the individual is "no doubt the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society." Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.

[77] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 128.

[78] Charles Guignon, 2004. "Becoming a Self: The Role of Authenticity in Being and Time," in *The Existentialists: Critical Essays on Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre*, ed. Charles Guignon (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 120.

[79] There is, for instance, a certain degree of subjectivism or individualism in Foucault, whose notion of life as a work of art presupposes the possibility of free choice, whereas Heidegger dismissed the conception that liberty is possessed by existence as a property. See Alain Beaulieu, "Les sources heideggeriennes de la notion d'existence chez le dernier Foucault," in *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 101, no. 4 (2003): 640–57; 652.

[80] Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, pp. 186–87.

[81] Thomas R Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*, vol. 2 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 178.

[82] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 75.

[83] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 227.

[84] Ibid., 175.

[85] Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism," *ELH* 56, no. 4 (1989): 733.

[86] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 50.

[87] Ibid., 3.

[88] Ibid., 5.

[89] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 29.

[90] Stephen Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 284.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72.

[93] Sheng, 3.

[94] Greenblatt, *The Rise and Fall of Adam and Eve*, 16.

[95] Ibid., 272.

[96] Liu, "The Power of Formalism," 733.

[97] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 307.

[98] Greenblatt, *The Swerve*, 3–4.

[99] Ibid., 6.