

Identity in Cultural Encounters: Greenblatt's Re-appropriation of the Foucauldian Subject

Zhu Wang

Tsinghua University
E-mail: wangzhu14@mails.tsinghua.edu.cn

Abstract

Foucault's somewhat striking remark that man is an invention in *Les mots et les choses* has triggered reconsideration of the notion of subject across different disciplines. In addition, his conception of the subject as embedded in a complex network of power and knowledge has provided impetus for the politico-historical turn in Renaissance studies more specifically known as New Historicism. This essay will trace the trajectory of Stephen Greenblatt's project of "historization of the subject" with a view to pointing out that in this project the Foucauldian anti-humanist notion of subject takes on a new form under the admitted influence of such anthropologists as Geertz and Rabinow. In line with the anthropologists, Greenblatt seeks to analyse how one can construct and recognize his own identity as a social product in encountering a culture distinct from his own – and what Harold Veerer refers to as 'cultural organicism' in Greenblatt is determined by this objective. The essay thus aims to thoroughly examine the Foucauldian legacy in Greenblatt, with an emphasis on how the Foucauldian analysis of the subject has been re-appropriated by the latter.

Keywords: *Foucault, Greenblatt, historization of the subject, identity, culture*

French Theories and the Shift in American Literary Criticism

In 1960s and 1970s America, as critics were engaged in seeking new directions in literary criticism after New Criticism had passed out of favour, a number of French thinkers were introduced into the American literary circles. In 1966, Jacques Derrida read his celebrated paper in a symposium at the Johns Hopkins Humanities Center. The intention of this symposium was to explore the general impact of 'structuralism' – of which many American scholars were still ignorant at that time – in a variety of disciplines.¹ Derrida's paper, however, was marked by an explicit break with the basic assumptions of structuralism and was later generally considered to mark the beginning of what is known as 'post-structuralism'.² While Yale critics such as Paul de Man or Geoffrey Hartman were witnessing a shift to (Derridean) post-structuralism in their critical careers, students and professors at Berkeley were sharing enthusiasm for a variety of theories that came to provide impetus for their critical practices. Among the theorists who have in one way or another inspired literary critics, Michel Foucault is of especial relevance as he is counted among the most important intellectual sources for

¹ See *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), xv.

² For a more detailed account of this event and its immense influence in America, see, for instance, Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 157-210.

the critical school known as New Historicism. As Stephen Greenblatt, the major exponent of this school, relates to us, ‘the presence of Michel Foucault on the Berkeley Campus’ and ‘more generally the influence in America of European (and especially French) anthropological and social theorists, has helped to shape my own literary critical practice’.³ With the advent of continental influences in America, literary critics and students alike were ushered into a brand-new world:

The appearance in English translation, during the early 1970s, of Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and Jürgen Habermas’ *Knowledge and Interests* helped American students to realize that there was an intellectual world in which the study of literature has never been disjoined either from philosophy or from social criticism.⁴

In the wake of such a theoretical ferment, topics such as ‘ideology’ or ‘power’ were no longer dismissed as irrelevant to literary studies. Indeed, they became the ‘new transcendental’, or what Jürgen Habermas means by ‘*transzendental-historischer Grundbegriff*’,⁵ in literary criticism. That literary works were supposed to be interpreted in relation to historical reality or social practices was accepted as a new paradigm. To be more specific, the Foucauldian notion of subjectivity as an effect of power, which is, as we will see in the essay, a crucial dimension of Foucault’s critique of western society, has been of enormous influence for many literary critics, among whom Greenblatt is a prominent figure.⁶

Foucault, Greenblatt, and the Notion of Subject in Power Relations

Foucault’s conception of subject as embedded in a complex network of power and knowledge is now too well-known to call for an introduction. From his seemingly astonishing definition of man as a recent invention in *Les mots et les choses*⁷ to the powerful analysis of how individuals are fashioned into docile subjects in *Surveiller et punir*,⁸ Foucault always seems to emphasize that the subject is a mere social construct rather than a given. Although to what extent his work can be seen as a consistent one remains utterly undecided, the subject, as an object under examination, is always of great importance to his project. As Foucault remarks 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

³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 197 (hereafter quoted as *LtC* with page references in the text).

⁴ Richard Rorty, ‘Deconstruction’, in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 8: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Raman Selden (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 178.

⁵ Habermas argues that for Foucault, the notion of ‘power’ (*Macht*) has become a new ‘transcendental-historical basic-concept’ (*transzendental-historischer Grundbegriff*) as ‘Life’ (*Leben*) in Bergson, Dilthey and Himmell. See Jürgen Habermas, *Der Philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 298.

⁶ For a thorough examination of the Foucault-influenced notion of subjectivity and Greenblatt’s influence on literary studies, see Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3-25.

⁷ ‘on peut être sûr que l’homme y est une invention récente.’ See Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 398.

⁸ In *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault has thoroughly examined how individuals are fashioned into subjects in the modern society through ‘discipline’, where corporal punishment in public gives place to ‘cellular prison’ as the general instrument to exercise power: ‘In this way the discipline produces [...] “docile” bodies’ (*La discipline fabrique ainsi [...] des corps « docile »*). See Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 138-40; translation mine.

beings are made subjects'.⁹ The subject in question is apparently neither the mysterious given capable of experience and intuition in Cartesian philosophy, nor the ultimate source of meaning in humanist literary criticism – it is rather a historical construct susceptible to all kinds of contingencies. When Foucault goes to analyse what factors may be attributed to the construction of the subject, he becomes 'quite involved with the question of power', as it dawns on him that 'while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations'.¹⁰ The question of power, by virtue of its relevance to Foucault's project, now becomes one of his major concerns, and it is in relation to the power relations that Foucault has conducted his impressive study of the human subject. Embedded in this complex network of power relations, the subject can scarcely be said to have any real autonomy. The power relations, as the ideology *chez* Althusser, become for Foucault the omnipresent reality in which a real 'outside' is eliminated.

It is this negative conception of social reality that is supposed by some critics to be the most apparent connection between Foucault and the New Historicism, the former's 'most identifiable legacy in American literary studies',¹¹ to use Geoffrey Harpham's term. Frank Lentricchia, for instance, is among the critics who see in New Historicism – or more specifically, in Stephen Greenblatt's work, an appropriation of the Foucauldian monolithic power. As Harpham insightfully pointed out, 'much of Lentricchia's criticism is aimed at the shadowy figure of Michel Foucault as the power behind New Historicism's "power"'.¹² To be sure, Lentricchia's accusing New Historicism of complicity with Foucault in eliminating the human subject's agency is, at all events, far from unjustified. For Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, one of the founding texts for New Historicism, the subject has been denied real autonomy: '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.'¹³ What is worse is, as Lentricchia rightly observes, that 'the modes of social opposition' in Greenblatt's work 'in the end merely confirm the original paradigms from which the rebel never departs'.¹⁴ And for Lentricchia, as Harpham argues, "opposition" and "power" are "structurally at odds", and "all value, as well as all the pleasure and freedom" are "on the side of the former" – Lentricchia simply refuses to listen when Foucault 'invokes what Hoy calls "the intransitivity of freedom" as the necessary condition of power'.¹⁵ Harpham rightly points out that power is not always repressive for Foucault, who repeatedly emphasizes that the negative conception of power as always saying no must now be dismissed.¹⁶ Foucault's own conception of power is, quite the contrary, a much

⁹ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208.

¹⁰ Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', 209.

¹¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'Foucault and the New Historicism', *American Literary History* 2.3 (Summer 1991): 370; available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/490057> [accessed 30 May 2017].

¹² Harpham, 369.

¹³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 256 (hereafter cited as *RSF* with page references in the text).

¹⁴ Frank Lentricchia, 'Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?', in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veenser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 239.

¹⁵ Harpham, 370.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 196. As Foucault has made it clear, his study of prison has convinced him that the negative conception of power as 'an essentially judicial mechanism' is just inadequate. See Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 183-4.

more positive one: “In fact, the power produces; it produces the real; it produces the domains of objects and the rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that we can have of it are subordinated to this production”.¹⁷ For Foucault, power consists in the complex techniques by which various things are produced – and the human subject is certainly among these products. The power relations, in connection with the concrete forms that knowledge takes at a certain time, determine the modes in which the subjects are formed. As we have seen earlier, Foucault aims to create a history of these different modes, which are, needless to say, time- and place-specific. More importantly, for Foucault the ‘effective history’ (*wirkliche Historie*)¹⁸ lies in singling out the individual events, rather than presenting a continuous development:

An entire historical tradition (theological or rationalistic) aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity – as a teleological movement or a natural process. ‘Effective’ history, however, deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations.¹⁹

Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, as its title suggests, represents the author’s attempts to explore the identity-formation practices of the writers in sixteenth-century England. The whole story is not, like the Tillyardian “world picture”,²⁰ a monological one, from which Greenblatt always seems to keep his distance. Greenblatt instead makes every effort to show that in his work “each chapter is intended to stand alone as an exploration whose contours are shaped by our grasp of the specific situation of the author or text” (*RSF*, 8). In line with Foucault’s emphasis on the specific forms of the different modes, Greenblatt’s exploration of self-fashioning also shows a special respect for particularities. It is this reluctance to provide a *grand récit* that lies behind Greenblatt’s penchant for independent case studies and indeed recalls Foucault’s recurrent rejection of theories independent from concrete social practices. Consider the telling remark in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, another key text in New Historicism:

I had tried to organize the mixed motives of Tudor and Stuart culture under the rubric power, but that term implied a structural unity and stability of command belied by much of what I actually knew about the exercise of authority and force in the period.²¹

The use of the term, ‘power’, now lends much support to our conviction that Greenblatt’s exploration of Renaissance culture and texts shares at least one essential belief with Foucault’s work: both stick to power as a crucial concept in analysing social practices. Yet, as Greenblatt goes on to argue, this term implies a “structural unity”, which is highly misleading.²² The notion of monolithic power, held by some to be

¹⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 196.

¹⁸ Foucault is using Nietzsche’s term here. For his own clarification, see Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 88.

¹⁹ Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, 88.

²⁰ See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Random House, 1959), 12; 25.

²¹ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California University Press, 1988), 2 (hereafter quoted as *SN* with page references in the text).

²² Greenblatt finds himself quite uneasy with the notion of ‘totalizing society’, which presupposes that all members in a certain society are under the sway of a monolithic power. The term *power* for Greenblatt suggests a stable structure, a sense of unity that can by no means exist: ‘and Elizabethan and Jacobean vision of hidden unity seemed like anxious rhetorical attempts to conceal cracks, conflict, and disarray.’ See *SN*, 2.

characteristic of Greenblatt,²³ is explicitly dismissed. The point that Greenblatt seeks to make here is that the concrete forms of social practices at a certain time can only be the result of 'institutional and ideological contestation' (*SN*, 3) rather than a totalizing power.

The Historical Subject: Greenblatt and the Foucauldian Legacy

Now it becomes clear that for both Greenblatt and Foucault power is like a privileged explanatory key in accounting for the concrete forms of social practices. And more importantly, the notion of power as developed by both is far from a stable entity. For Foucault, as we did see earlier, the study of power only serves to help him create a history of the modes by which we are made subjects. And for Greenblatt, the exploration of subject is, as we will see, just as important. That Greenblatt is concerned with the emergence of modern subjectivity is manifested in, among others, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. What Greenblatt seeks to drive at in this book is that one's identity is constructed out of 'a manipulable, artful process' (*RSF*, 2). In the sixteenth century, as Greenblatt tends to believe, people grow increasingly conscious of the fact that one's self is a social construct rather than a given. And Greenblatt goes on to argue that it is in struggling against the authority, which may be the sovereign or the religious institutions, that writers such as More or Tyndale attempt to fashion their selves. The authority in question, by virtue of its power to shape identity, recalls Foucault's power relations.²⁴ In Foucault's work, as we have seen above, the power relations produce a variety of things through exercising complex techniques. The power relations produce discourses, which in turn produce human identities. In the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*, for instance, Foucault strikingly remarks that as the modern correlative to the *scientia sexualis*, sexuality, a critical dimension of identity, is produced out of the strategies of power (*les stratégies de pouvoir*). The complex network of *dispositifs*, through producing discourses, which are in turn supposed to produce 'the truth of sex' (*la vérité du sexe*), manages to make sexuality appear like a given, rather than a construct.²⁵

Foucault's remark on sexuality is, not surprisingly, echoed by Greenblatt, who in his 'Fiction and Friction' presents a fresh examination of the question of sexuality across distinct social discourses in the Renaissance. In this essay, Greenblatt fully exploits his gift for establishing unconventional connections between literary and non-literary texts and then linking the two with certain social practices, with a view to examining the entire society with regard to its *épistémè*, to use Foucault's term. The Foucauldian notion of the subject constructed out of discourse is now appropriated by the critic of Renaissance literature. Greenblatt's thesis here can be best summed up by his remark: 'taken as a whole, a culture's sexual discourse plays a critical role in the shaping of identity' (*SN*, 75). Sexuality, conventionally known as part of one's nature -

²³ Frank Lentricchia, for one, remarks: 'Greenblatt's recuperation, under the mask of power, of Hegelian expressive unity of culture (a monological vision), is one but not the most interesting theoretical anomaly of new historicism.' ('Foucault's Legacy', 239.)

²⁴ While Greenblatt at times relies on the sovereign as an agent of power, Foucault's power relations, however, are without a subject (*le pouvoir sans le roi*). The power, as he remarks, is 'exercised rather than is possessed'. See Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 31. In addition, in contrast to Foucault, who tends to draw a more comprehensive picture of social reality, Greenblatt usually takes concrete individuals as his departure point.

²⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1: La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 91.

thus a given - now becomes a construct of social discourses, which may include 'marriage manuals; medical, theological, and legal texts; sermons; indictments and defences of women; and literary fictions' (SN, 75). As Greenblatt argues, the book, *On Hermaphrodites, Childbirth, and the Medical Treatment of Mothers and Children*, written by a doctor named Jacques Duval, is 'part of the particular and contingent discourse out of which historically specific subjects were fashioned, represented, and communally incorporated' (SN, 75). By imposing on individuals some prescriptive conventions, or what Greenblatt means by 'a system of dispositions and orientations', discourse manages to draw individual improvisations towards 'a firm and decisive identification with normative structures' (SN, 75). Foucault's analysis of social reality based on an anti-humanist notion of the subject, and his drawing heavily upon peripheral texts, accepted and impressively appropriated by Greenblatt, serve for the latter as models for explaining and interpreting both texts and social practices. It is this characteristically Foucauldian analysis of historically specific subjects, which are produced at a certain time as a consequence of a concerted effort of power relations, social discourses and other possible forms of social practices, that constitutes Foucault's most important legacy in Greenblatt. Some of Foucault's notions, such as resistance as purposefully produced by power (or Greenblatt's 'authority') or the power capable of shaping individual identity, can only be drawn upon by Greenblatt so long as the latter has fully appropriated the former's analytical model. Along with Greenblatt, a good number of critics sharing a similar interest are actively engaged in the further exploration of Renaissance subjectivity. The question as to whether there is any possibility of resistance to power, generally inspired by Foucault's work, comes to the fore in these discussions.²⁶

Diachrony and Synchrony: Foucault and Greenblatt's Historization of the Subject

Greenblatt remarks in an interview, in response to the criticism that New Historicism is too subjective, that 'the whole point of New Historicism is to call into question and to historicize the subject'.²⁷ Greenblatt's point here is, most assuredly, that criticism as such is based on a humanist notion of the subject, which is exactly what New Historicism attempts to abandon. And in asserting that 'the whole point of New Historicism is to call into question and to historicize the subject', Greenblatt seeks, as Foucault did in his last years, to endow his otherwise ill-connected works with a certain degree of consistency.²⁸ That the exploration of subject is of great importance to

²⁶ See, for instance, Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli and Montaigne*; Jonathan Goldberg, *Jamesland the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London: Methuen), 1986. Theorists of subjectivity such as Althusser or Nietzsche are also at times held to be of relevance to such discussions; it is, however, Foucault's examination of the subject within power relations that has most often provided the crucial inspiration.

²⁷ Sheng Anfeng, 'Penetrating Cultures and Reconstructing History: An Interview with Stephen Greenblatt', *Contemporary Foreign Language Studies* 3 (2010): 6.

²⁸ Taken at face value, Greenblatt's works lack a thematic unity – his concerns range from 'self-fashioning' through 'circulation of social energy' to 'purgatory in *Hamlet*'. As Walter Cohen argues, 'each essay is a fresh start in which a particular issue is pursued to a logical extreme without the constraint of an organizing principle, contradictions between essays arise as a matter of course.' Yet, in telling us what 'the whole point of New Historicism' is, Greenblatt more or less manages to deliver himself from

Greenblatt's work is now beyond question. The critical question here is, however, what exactly does Greenblatt mean by 'to historicize' or what makes it distinct from Foucault's 'to create a history'? I would like to suggest that a possible answer can be derived from a contrastive analysis of both his and Foucault's works.

One of the striking resemblances between Foucault and Greenblatt is that both are less willing to construct a grand theoretical system than immerse themselves in case studies. *L'archéologie du savoir* is the only book written by Foucault with a view to providing a theoretical meditation on his analytical approach. For Greenblatt, quite similarly, a theoretical system independent of concrete contexts is clearly not what he can feel comfortable with: 'My own work has always been done with a sense of just having to go about and do it, without establishing first what my theoretical position is' (*LtC*, 196). In this sense, both Foucault and Greenblatt are doing history of a sort—that is, they both tend to study an entity by placing it in a concrete context. A closer examination will reveal to us, however, that they are doing history differently. Greenblatt's 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture', one of the less-discussed texts by the author, is nonetheless of much relevance to our discussion here as in this essay his own conception of the historically specific subject is spelled out. The essay begins with a story, an anecdote of a sort, as befits a New Historicist, about a certain Martin Guerre,²⁹ whose identity is made possible only after 'propriety rights to the self have been secured' (*LtC*, 185), that is, after the judge has affirmed his claim to a set of material possessions. Greenblatt's point here is that Martin Guerre's subjectivity 'seems to be the product of the relations, material objects and judgments exposed in the case' (*LtC*, 184). Taking this story as a departure point, Greenblatt goes on to argue that 'our identity may not originate in (or be guaranteed by) the fixity, the certainty, of our own body' (*LtC*, 186). Apparently in line with Greenblatt's notion of sexuality, the identity in question also seems to originate in 'the relations' rather than 'the fixity and the certainty' of one's body. More importantly, Greenblatt ventures to state that for the Renaissance there exists no 'natural person' beneath our 'mask'. The subjectivity, which psychoanalysis takes as the explanatory key, is in fact a product of Renaissance discourse - that is, it is the discourses that emerge in the literary and legal procedures in the Renaissance that have made the sense of self possible. Thus, the desperate attempts by psychoanalytical interpretation to explain Renaissance texts in terms of loss or possession of identity are doomed to fail. The certainty of body, which psychoanalysis relies on so heavily as where the identity originates, may matter much less for the Renaissance in confirming one's identity.

The point here is that, as Greenblatt argues at length, one's identity is indeed a cultural construct with its own history (a discontinuous one) rather than a transcendent given. Identity, as Greenblatt views it, may take quite distinct forms over time. The assumption that there exists only one stable 'self' all along, which surely possesses a consoling force, is merely one of the consequences of repressing histories. A glance at the essay will assure us that Greenblatt is indeed trying to 'call into question and to

this predicament. See Walter Cohen, 'Political Criticism of Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Reproduced*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 34.

²⁹ As Natalie Zemon Davis relates to us in her book, the whole story roughly goes like this: 'in the 1540s in Languedoc, a rich peasant leaves his wife, child, and property and is not heard from for years; he comes back - or so everyone thinks - but after three or four years of agreeable marriage the wife says she has been tricked by an impostor and brings him to trial. The man almost persuades the court he is Martin Guerre, when at the last moment the true Martin Guerre appears.' See Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press), 1983, vii.

historicize the subject' here. By placing the subject in a historical process, one can see clearly that it is no longer the given that we once held it to be. Without a sense of history, without due attention to the fact that there may exist a notion of subject quite distinct from our own, one can hardly manage to understand the past well enough. It is necessary to note here, however, that in his critical works Greenblatt seldom travels beyond the Renaissance despite his ambitious attempt to historicize the subject. Unlike Foucault, who always has a taste for examining the differences between *la Renaissance*, *l'âge classique* and *l'âge moderne*, Greenblatt seems to be obsessed with the Renaissance – whatever happens before or after it is virtually out of the picture. Thus, a line characteristic of Greenblatt may be: 'in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process.' (*RSF*, 2) What is implied in the remark is that before the sixteenth century there can only be a lesser degree of this self-consciousness about self-fashioning, but an account of what exactly it looks like is never provided. And in 'Psychoanalysis and the Renaissance Culture', as we have seen, Greenblatt has deployed a similar approach. The story about Martin Guerre serves to reveal to us the Renaissance vision of identity by making visible to us how one's claim to identity is confirmed at that time. Thus, any attempt to explain Renaissance texts based on a conception of subjectivity that is, as Greenblatt argues, in actual fact the result of Renaissance discourse, is doomed from the very beginning. The question of how our conception of identity evolves over time, however, never seems to interest Greenblatt.

The two approaches known as archaeology and genealogy, as Foucault develops in his major works,³⁰ are simply two ways of doing history compatible with his project - to create a history of the modes in which individuals are made subjects. Compared to Greenblatt, Foucault always seems far more willing to travel across different ages. In *Surveiller et punir*, where Foucault attempts to present the genealogy of the modern individual, some chapters are devoted to thoroughly examining what forms disciplinary technology takes before the emergence of prison, despite his explicit focus on the prison as a highly complicated punitive institution. In *Les mots et les choses*, where Foucault is at his more archaeological moments, the author is engaged in analysing the different *épistémès* from *la Renaissance* through *l'âge classique* to *l'âge moderne*. The whole point of Foucault's historical approaches is, as he makes clear, to historicize the 'constitution of the subject', rather than relying on the stable subject as some explanatory key:

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the fields of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.³¹

³⁰ Foucault's 'archaeology' is the study of the rules governing what discourses are legitimated as knowledge at a certain period – the object is the 'conditions of possibility' of our knowledge: 'in this narrative, what have to appear within the space of knowledge are the configurations that have given rise to the different forms of empirical knowledge.' (Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 13) By 'genealogy', Foucault means an approach to history that seeks individual events rather than a coherent narrative. In examining the rules (archaeology), Foucault also reveals to us how different ages are characterized by different *épistémès* (genealogy) – thus, in Foucault's works one approach is indeed supplanted by the other.

³¹ Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, 117.

What Foucault means by 'to get rid of the subject' is simply that we have to cease to regard subject as the cause of history, as some fixed essence. The history revealed to us by the genealogists is far from one of continuities – it is rather, in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's words, 'one of accidents, dispersion, chance events'.³² In line with Foucault's genealogy, which he attempts to clarify here, the archaeological approach *à la* Foucault also seeks discontinuities: 'The discontinuity', which the historians have sought to repress in history, 'now has become one of the fundamental elements of the historical analysis'.³³ Seen as inter-complementary,³⁴ archaeology and genealogy represent Foucault's effort to substitute a history of sudden disruptions for one of continuities. In tracing the descent (*Herkunft*) of the modern subject by demonstrating its discontinuous history, its various forms in the course of history, Foucault manages to prove that the subject is merely an effect of history. The point is that Foucault tends to emphasize that any event in history virtually stands on its own - the notion that in the history of an entity there are a series of stages such as a beginning or an end, throughout which the entity to a certain degree retains its identity, should now be abandoned. The subjectivity - which used to serve as the reliable foundation of knowledge in Cartesian philosophy – is now reduced to an effect of history. That Foucault is concerned with presenting a history of discontinuities, in which any essentialist notion of the subject is utterly dismissed, must be seen as the primary factor that determines his willingness to conduct contrastive analyses of different ages.

Recognition of Self in Others: Identity in Cultural Encounters

Compared to Foucault's history of discontinuities with its emphasis on diachrony, Greenblatt's historization of the subject seems only too synchronic. The full-fledged diachrony as is worthy of a 'historization' is, quite to our surprise, eliminated in Greenblatt's work. Harold Veesser, among others, remarks on New Historicists' penchant for synchrony: 'Whereas historians traditionally balanced their sociological organicity and their linear historicity, NHs let their organicism eclipse their historicism'.³⁵ The 'organism' that Veesser speaks of is from the philosopher, Morton White, whose definition of 'historicism' and 'cultural organicism' Veesser has cited here:

By 'historicism' I shall mean the attempt to explain facts by reference to earlier facts; by 'cultural organicism' I mean the attempt to find explanations and relevant material in social sciences other than the one which is primarily under investigation. The historicist reaches back in time in order to account for certain phenomena; the cultural organist reaches into the entire social space around him.³⁶

³² Dreyfus and Rabinow, 108.

³³ Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 16.

³⁴ For a detailed account of the two approaches as inter-complementary, see Thomas Flynn, 'Foucault's Mapping of History', in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-46.

³⁵ H. Aram Veesser, 'The New Historicism', in *The New Historicism Reader*, ed. H. Aram Veesser (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.

³⁶ Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 12.

To be sure, as White does not hesitate to add, the two tendencies may well exist side by side in the thought of a single man. Yet in Greenblatt's work, which is widely known as 'New Historicism', the 'historicism' as is defined by White is far less prominent than its counterpart, cultural organicism. As early as in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt has fully exploited his gift for linking places or things that are ocean apart – here sixteenth-century Hispaniola and Shakespeare's characters. The time span of the whole story in the book is, by contrast, a rather short one. And in 'Invisible Bullets', another major text by Greenblatt, we are once again amazed by how far Greenblatt can travel – what happens in the English colony in America is linked to Shakespeare's 'broad institutional appropriation' (*SN*, 40). Examples as such are not uncommon in Greenblatt's works, which vividly demonstrate to us how his 'organicism' has eclipsed his 'historicism'. If we are convinced that Foucault's contrastive analysis of different ages is determined by his attempt to create a history in which the subject is reduced to an effect of social practices, then we have to consider now what exactly lies behind Greenblatt's synchronic historization – his tendency to travel across nations to 'historicize the subject'. The answer, as I will argue, lies in Greenblatt's conviction that identity is formed and recognized only in encounters between individuals, races or cultures.

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt has made it clear that self-fashioning 'occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien' (*RSF*, 9). Here the 'authority' and the 'alien' are, as I have to point out, not necessarily from different nations or races, as the individual cases in the book demonstrate. Yet it is in this very book that Greenblatt's interest in intercultural encounters, which serve a variety of purposes, is made explicit. In the sixth chapter, Greenblatt introduces a mode of behaviour characteristic of the West – 'improvisation', as he terms it. The term is simply supposed to mean, as far as Greenblatt is concerned, 'the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario' (*RSF*, 227). In the context of Greenblatt's study of the Shakespearean play, *Othello*, which is the subject of this chapter, this term is concerned with the 'Europeans' ability again and again to insinuate themselves into the pre-existing political, religious, even psychic structures of the natives and to turn those structure to their advantage' (*RSF*, 227). As Greenblatt's study demonstrates, Iago, the infamous character in *Othello*, is a master of improvisation: he is 'demonically sensitive to the way individuals interpret discourse' and he has 'the role-player's ability to imagine his nonexistence so that he can exist for a moment in another and as another' (*RSF*, 235). Thus, what Iago manages to do to Othello becomes a prominent model for what the Europeans seek to do to the natives. The encounter between the Europeans and the natives, as Greenblatt seeks to argue here, is triggered by the Europeans' will to seek profit. This conception now constitutes an important dimension of our understanding of the intercultural encounter: the Europeans take the initiative in crossing long distances to encounter the alien cultures only out of a strong desire for profit. What lend further strength to this conviction are the impressive stories told by Harriot, which Greenblatt has cited and thoroughly analysed in 'Invisible Bullets'. (See *SN*, 21-39). The English colonizers in Virginia make all effort to 'insinuate themselves' into the natives' religious beliefs and impose on the natives a set of coercive belief to their advantage: 'The Indians must be persuaded that the Christian God is all-powerful and committed to the survival of his chosen people' (*SN*, 30). With a conviction that any disrespect for the colonizers in

effect constitutes an offence against God, the Indians have to provide these colonizers with food and other goods.

There is, however, apart from the search for profit, another dimension in such encounters that is yet to be illuminated. The encounters can, as far as Greenblatt's work is concerned, serve multiple purposes. In the encounter between the Europeans (the civilized) and the natives (the primitive), profit is far from the only thing that is involved – in fact, the Europeans in encountering the natives have also managed to know themselves better. In the intensive interactions between the two cultures, the Europeans are somewhat surprised to find out that the primitive culture is in some respects so similar to their own that an attentive look at it will tell them what they are still ignorant of in their own culture. Consider again Greenblatt's 'Invisible Bullets', where he remarks on Harriot's practice of imposing on the natives some coercive belief to ensure the control over them:

Harriot tests and seems to confirm the most radically subversive hypothesis in his culture about the origin and function of religion by imposing his religion – with its intense claims to transcendence, unique truth, inescapable coercive force - on others. (*SN*, 30)

In attentively examining the religious belief of the Algonquian Indians, Harriot is virtually questioning his own belief. What he once held to be absolutely true may well be 'a set of beliefs manipulated by the subtlety of priests to help instil obedience and respect for authority' (*SN*, 26). Thus, when he manages to impose the coercive belief on the natives, the hypothesis about the 'origin and function of religion' is also confirmed. As a sixteenth-century Englishman, Harriot considers religious belief an essential dimension of his identity, hence his questioning of it may lead him to reconsider his own identity – we are on the way to better understanding ourselves, to more fully grasping our identities, in encountering others.

In *Reflections on the Fieldwork in Morocco*, a book Greenblatt has listed among those which have exerted some influence on him (*RSF*, 259), Paul Rabinow remarks:

Thus, following Paul Ricoeur, I define the problem of hermeneutics (which is simply Greek for 'interpretation') as 'the comprehension of self by the detour of the comprehension of the other.' It is vital to stress that this is not psychology of any sort, despite the definite psychological overtones in certain passages. The self being discussed is perfectly public, it is neither the purely cerebral cogito of the Cartesians, nor the deep psychological self of the Freudians. Rather it is the culturally mediated and historically situated self which finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning.³⁷

As Rabinow makes it clear, the self is not the self in a psychological sense; it is rather a 'culturally mediated and historically situated self', a 'public self'. Thus, what is comprehended by this 'retour of the comprehension of the other' is actually one's cultural identity fashioned in social practices. It should be noted that the 'other' is here supposed to mean 'the alien race or culture', which is the proper object of anthropological studies. In the encounter with the alien culture, an attentive examination of many aspects of its social structure is triggered by a sense of unfamiliarity, a stare at the cultural differences with amazement. As Greenblatt remarks, a sense of wonder is 'the central figure in the initial European response to the New World, the decisive

³⁷ Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2007), 5-6.

emotional and intellectual experience in the presence of radical difference'.³⁸ Afterward, however, this sense of wonder only comes to give place to 'a peculiar blend of estrangement and familiarity, a collapse of the other into the same and an ironic transformation of the same into the other.'³⁹ What appears before our eyes is at once similar to and different from what we already have. Thus, in the encounter with the other, our reconsideration of our own cultural identity, the public self, is triggered by the heightened attention to the seemingly different patterns of culture, which only come to seem quite similar, if not exactly identical, to what we are most familiar with. Hence the necessity of 'the detour of comprehension of the other' in 'the comprehension of self'.

It becomes clear now that the synchrony of Greenblatt's historization, or what Veenser refers to as 'organicism', is determined by his anthropology-influenced conception of identity. The 'self' in Greenblatt's work is, in Rabinow's words, a 'public self'. 'Becoming human is becoming individual', as Clifford Geertz argues, 'and we become individual under the guidance of cultural systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives.'⁴⁰ In the course of immersion in a certain culture or certain cultures, we have internalized the belief, custom and values that certain communities hold, which then become a part of our identity. These values or belief cease to be neglected only when we take an attentive look at them, where a re-examination of our identity begins. It is an attempt at this re-examination that lies behind Greenblatt's synchronic approach to the question of the subject, which is in contrast to Foucault's diachronic analyses. As Koenraad Geldof rightly argues,

Les mots et les choses, *Surveiller et punir* and *La Volonté de savoir* considers the modern society from within: what is at stake is to show how the social, cultural and sexual identity constitutes the result of the *dispositifs* of knowledge and the technologies of power. Greenblatt carries out an inverse trajectory: *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* reconstructs within the genesis and structure of the modern subjectivity, while *Marvelous Possessions* relates the confrontation of the European identity to the Otherness of the cultures of the New World.⁴¹

The goal of Foucault's work is, as he puts it in the above-quoted lines, to create a history of the modes in which the individuals are made subjects 'in our culture' – he has always been concerned with, in Geldof's words, 'the modern society from within' (*la société moderne dedans*). In presenting a genealogy of the subject, Foucault constantly 'reaches back in time'. In the history that he has created, the subject is reduced to an effect of history, a result of power relations and knowledge, behind which there is no such thing as an essence. This nominalist conception of subjectivity is appropriated by Greenblatt, as his 'Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture' and 'Fiction and Friction' most clearly demonstrate. It should be noted, however, that Greenblatt's conception of identity is to a great extent influenced by such anthropologists as Geertz and Rabinow. Thus, there is in Greenblatt's work a tendency for crossing geographical boundaries,

³⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14.

³⁹ Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 44.

⁴⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 52.

⁴¹ Koenraad Geldof, 'Modernité, excès, littérature: une lecture contrastive de Michel Foucault et de Stephen Greenblatt', *Littérature* 151 (2008): 106; available at <http://www.cairn.info/revue-litterature-2008-3-page-90.htm> [accessed 7 June 2017].

along with his shying away from diachronic analyses. In crossing the great distances to encounter the natives, the civilized are offered a chance of better knowing themselves:

In encountering the Algonquian Indians, Harriot not only thought he was encountering a simplified version of his own culture but also evidently believed that he was encountering his own civilization's past. This past could best be investigated in the privileged anthropological moment of the initial encounter, for the comparable situations in Europe itself tended to be already contaminated by prior contact. Only in the forest, with a people ignorant of Christianity and startled by its bearers' technological potency, could one hope to reproduce accurately, with live subjects, the relation between Numa and the primitive Romans, Moses and the Hebrews. (*SN*, 28)

The past is, needless to say, irretrievably lost: one can never travel back in time to know what the past is really like. In crossing immense distances to encounter primitive cultures, however, we are given access to the past to see how our identity, or a certain part of it, is formed. What the Europeans have discovered in the encounter with the Natives were not limited to lands, fortunes or slaves – an unexpected encounter with their own past in the alien cultures, a recognition of certain dimensions of their own identity there, are also among the 'marvelous possessions'.

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Identitate și întâlniri culturale. Reînșușirea noțiunii foucauldiane de subiect la Greenblatt

Rezumat

Afimația oarecum bizară a lui Foucault din *Les mots et les choses* cum că omul este o invenție sa dus la reconsiderarea noțiunii de subiect în mai multe discipline. În plus, concepția sa asupra subiectului ca făcând parte dintr-o rețea de putere și cunoaștere a provocat o reconsiderare politico-istorică a studiilor despre Renaștere cunoscută sub numele de noul istorism. Eseul va urmări traiectoria proiectului lui Stephen Greenblatt de „istorizare a subiectului” cu scopul de a puncta că în acest proiect noțiunea anti-umanistă foucauldiană de subiect ia o nouă formă sub influența admisă a unor antropologi precum Geertz și Rabinow. În acord cu antropologii, Greenblatt caută să analizeze cum se poate construi și recunoaște propria identitate ca produs social la contactul cu o cultură distinctă față de cultura proprie – și ceea ce Harold Veeseer denumește organicism cultural în opera lui Greenblatt este determinat prin acest obiectiv. Acest eseu tinde să examineze moștenirea foucauldiană regăsită în opera lui Greenblatt, punând accentul pe analiza subiectului așa cum a fost reînșușită de cel din urmă.