Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare

Stephen Greenblatt
- American scholar who is credited with establishing "**New Historicism**"
    1. New Historicism is a literary theory which could help us understand intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural contexts.
    2. Term coined by Greenblatt
    3. Literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of both the history of the author the history of the critic.
    4. A work of literature is influenced by its author's times and circumstances, but the critics response to that work is also influenced by his environment, beliefs and prejudices (thus a critic's examination is tainted by his own culture and environment)
- Founder of the journal ""Representations"
- Influenced by Michel Foucault
- Documented the life and times of William Shakespeare in "Will in the World: How Shakespeare became Shakespeare" (2004)
- Won Pulitzer prize for the work "The Swerve: How the World became Modern" (2011)
- General editor of *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (after M H Abrams)
- Collaborated with Charles Mee on "Cardenio", lost play of Shakespeare

The Essay
- In 16th C England- both individual <u>selves</u> and <u>sense</u> could be fashioned
- By 'Selves' he meant: a) a sense of personal order, b) a characteristic mode of address to the world, c) a structure of suppressed desires & d) some elements of <u>deliberate shaping</u> which helped in the formation and expression of identity.
- People <u>enjoyed less freedom</u> (autonomy) in self-fashioning due to the presence of **the family, state, religious institutions**, which imposed a rigid and far reaching discipline upon the middle class and aristocratic subjects.
- <u>Autonomy was not the central issue, instead **the 'power'** to impose and control identity (of other and oneself) was the major issue</u>.
- It is hard to characterize the change in the intellectual, social, psychological and aesthetic structures that govern identities, as it is not only complex but dialectical also.
- Increased self-consciousness about the viability of fashioning of human identity as a manipulable and artful process.
- Elite's always knew this, but **Christianity** became more aware about the scope of man's power to shape identity
    > St. Augustine'' declaration that "Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin" is a good instance of the fear of man's capability of self fashioning himself
    > Spencer says in "Faerie Queen" that the general intention and meaning behind "Faerie Queen" is 'to fashion a gentleman'
- **'Fashion'** a verb which appears so often in Spencer's time, but was rare before or during Chaucer's period
- In 16th C, the word became popular with the meaning: '**forming oneself'**
- It can mean shaping the physical structure too, but mostly it meant moulding a distinctive personality through a <u>consistent mode of perceiving and behaving</u>
- Recurrent model is Christ – Tyndale translation - 'he fashioned unto the shape of his son' – true Christian 'feeleth… himself… altered and fashioned like unto Christ'

- Richard Taverner (famous for his translation of Bible) in "Garden of Wysdome" (collection of aphorisms) says "whoever desires to be conversant with public affairs, must… fashion himself to the manners of men."
- **Separated from the imitation of Christ, it acquired new range of meanings due to the rise in anxiety to follow the said 'manners of men'**
- These manners include:
    a. Practice of parents and teachers
    b. Linked to manners and demeanors of the elite
    c. Hypocrisy and adherence
    d. Adherence to outward ceremony
    e. representation of one's nature or intention in speech or actions
- self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life by crossing the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control, the attempt to fashion other selves.
- We think that art alone is a human creation, and humans themselves are not.
- **Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways:**
    a. as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author (**literary biography** where the author risks losing a sense of the larger networks of meaning)
    b. as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped (**reflection of the ideological superstructure**)
    c. as a reflection upon those codes (**historical background**)
- A literary criticism that has affinities to this practice must be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal, however difficult to realize, is a *poetics of culture (cultural poetics)*
- Just like the social actions being embedded in systems of public signification, the words that constitute the works of literature are also embedded to the system.
- **Language is a collective construction** and **a critic must investigate the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text.**

- **great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture**
- the texts of study is viewed as the focal point for converging lines of force in sixteenth-century culture, and the critic should be able to understand how literary and social identities were formed in that culture
- the "I"-can be interpreted as a specific form of power, power at once localized in particular institutions—the court, the church, the colonial administration, the patriarchal family-and diffused in ideological structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns.
- **A critic must select a handful of interesting figures who would both reward intense, individual attention and would promise access to larger cultural patterns.**
- for the early sixteenth century, it does not pretend to autonomy; the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of power.
- **A critic have to make use of the operative condition of all human understanding-of the speech of his contemporaries as well as of the writings of the dead**
- The 16th C writers all embody a **profound mobility: 1. social or economical mobility 2. Geographical and ideological mobility, 3. restless mobility**

1. He quotes the life of **Thomas More, Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare** as example of **social or economical mobility** to say that "all of these talented middle-class men moved out of a narrowly circumscribed social sphere and into a realm that brought them in close contact with the powerful and the great." Also "All were in a position as well, to know with some intimacy those with no power, status, or education at all."

2. He takes **Tyndale** as an instance of **Geographical and ideological mobility** as his passage was from Catholic priest to Protestant, from the Gloucestershire of his successful yeoman farmer family to London and then to Continental exile, from obscurity to the dangerous fame of a leading heretic.

3. Lastly, he takes Wyatt's life as an example as his family had risen in status and wealth only in the preceding generation, so we have the restless mobility-'-France, Italy, Spain, Flanders-of the diplomat.

These six writers are all displaced in significant ways from a stable, inherited social world, and they all manifest in powerful and influential form aspects of Renaissance self-fashioning.

- He proposes **two radical antitheses**, **each of which gives way to a complex third term** in which the opposition is reiterated and transformed

  1. the conflict between More and Tyndale is reconceived in the figure of Wyatt,
  2. the conflict between Spenser and Marlowe is reconceived in the figure of Shakespeare.
  3. Wyatt and Shakespeare express in literary works more powerful than any produced by their contemporaries the historical pressure of an unresolved and continuing conflict.
  4. the issues raised at the theological level in the works of More and Tyndale are recapitulated at the secular level in the works of Spenser and Marlowe
  5. while Shakespeare explores in *Othello* and elsewhere the male sexual anxieties-the fear of betrayal, the suspension and release of aggression, the intimations of complicity in one's own torment-voiced in Wyatt's lyrics.
- These six figures show a direction towards power
  1. first triad, a shift from the Church to the Book to the absolutist state;
  2. the second triad, a shift from celebration, to rebellion to subversive submission
- we may posit a direction enacted by the works of literature in relation to society too:
- a shift from absorption by community, religious faith, or diplomacy toward the establishment of literary creation as a profession in its own right
- There is no such thing as a single "history of the self" in the sixteenth century, except as the product of our need to reduce the intricacies of complex and creative beings to safe and controllable **order.**
- Governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning are (both the authors and characters):

  1. **None** of the figures **inherits a title**, Except for Wyatt all are from Middle class families
  2. **submission to an absolute power or authority** situated at least partially outside the self-God, a sacred 'book, an institution such as church, court, colonial or military administration (Marlowe is an exception, but his consuming hostility to hierarchical al1thority has, as we shall see, some of the force of submission.)

3. **Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived** as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist-must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.
4. **The alien is perceived** by the authority either **as** that which is **unformed or chaotic** (the absence of order) or that which is **false or negative** (the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of the authority,)
5. **One man's authority is another man's alien.**
6. **When one authority or alien -is destroyed another takes its place.**
7. **There is always more than one authority and more than one alien in existence at a given time.**
8. If both **the authority and the alien are** located outside the self, they are at the same time **experienced as inward necessities**, so that both **submission and destruction are always already internalized**.
9. Self-fashioning is always, though **not exclusively, in language**.
10. **The power generated to attack the alien** in the name of the authority is **produced in excess** and threatens the authority it sets out to defend. Hence self-fashioning **always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.**

- self-fashioning *occurs* at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien, and achieved identity always contains within itself the signs of its own subversion or loss ..