

LAVDATIO DOMINI STEPHEN GREENBLATT

Professor Stephen Greenblatt has been the guest of academic circles in this country before, yet this is a particularly honouring occasion. When he first came to Bucharest in 1999, Professor Greenblatt gave a talk at New Europe College on 'Hamlet in Purgatory'. Work in progress at the time, his fascinating investigation of the Catholic background of Shakespeare's work *and* life soon came out as yet another crucial text in Shakespeare studies in the world. We do, of course, use it now as obvious bibliography in the field. In fact, no small number of basic titles bearing his signature feature as musts in our critical references, from undergraduate and graduate to MA or Ph.D. level.

When he first came to Bucharest, Professor Greenblatt was accompanied by Professor Ramie Targoff (Brandeis University), his wife, who gave a talk at the British Cultural Studies Centre. Both had been very appreciative of the noetic enthusiasm hosted by the then still crammed space in which New Europe College functioned. They were equally impressed by the intellectual fervour of the MA centre where a talk on the Prayer Book was avidly listened to on a Saturday morning. Nor did they conceal their pleasure at their audience just not letting them go before another dozen comments were formulated after rounds of questions. A couple of days later, New Europe College received a very warm message of thanks and gratitude from Professor Greenblatt, who made a point of saying he would love to come again. And here we are, minutes before our most distinguished colleague in the international academe becomes *doctor honoris causa* of the University of Bucharest.

Stephen Jay Greenblatt, the John Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard, was born in 1943 to be raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This, like another handful of symmetries, carries symbolic relevance in his career. The other Cambridge, the seat of medieval and Renaissance education, grants him an MA in 1968, after an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in English at Yale University, in 1968 and 1969, respectively. His academic life is associated for almost three decades with the University of California, Berkeley, where he is the Class of 1932 Professor till 1997, the year when he becomes the Harry Levin Professor of Literature at Harvard. He had been Visiting Professor at the latter university in the early to mid-90's, where, between 2000 and 2002, he acted as chair of the History and Literature Interdisciplinary Honor Program.

Yale, Harvard and Berkeley, a golden trio of American universities, turn substance for anecdotes, that exciting micro-genre which Stephen Greenblatt, like his late close friend Joel Fineman, has appositely made into serious food for thought when it comes to cultural identity, always and inevitably embedded in the larger historical context. The Wikipedia remarks the difficulty the professor faced leaving Berkeley, the greatest public university, but also the excitement of being faculty of the greatest private university in the world, placed on the East Coast, so near to his beloved Boston. It also recalls an episode at Yale, when the doctoral student Greenblatt, rushing out of a corner drugstore, nearly knocked down an elderly gentleman. No little was his surprise to realize that this was T.S. Eliot. From the same cozy electronic source we learn that the young Stephen Greenblatt declined an offer by Art Garfunkel (who is of Romanian Jewish ancestry) to play the guitar and sing with him and Paul Simon. Choosing college, he may have impeded the birth of another band than the famous Simon and Garfunkel. Doing so, he paved the way to massive changes in the approach to literature, the understanding and fashioning of the canon, the mapping of critical and theoretical fields. Who could now bend over any text of English-speaking literature without Greenblattian knowledge of some kind or another?

This is true in the whole of Europe, with Berlin's Wissenschaftskolleg, Florence's University and Paris's École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales holding pride of place in his international trajectory, counterbalanced by Kyoto and Peking Universities in the Far East. Stephen Greenblatt has opened the doors to the cultures they represent with the master key that the Shakespearean oeuvre is. East and West, his stature has risen to celebrate that of his sacred monster, William Shakespeare, with whom he has held a succession of negotiations, in his 'desire to speak with the dead', aware that works of art are firmly rooted in a highly specific life-world, while they speak to us now, feeling the 'touch of the real'.

Evidence of this lifelong homage paid to 'Will in the world' are honours and awards, lectures, fellowships and grants that punctuate his exceptional career: Fulbright Scholarship at Pembroke College, Cambridge (1964-66), Guggenheim Fellowship (1983), Visiting Fellow of the Council of the Humanities and the Department of English, Princeton University (1986), University of Bologna 900th Anniversary Celebration Professor and Clarendon Lectures, Oxford University (1988), Renato Poggioli Lecture, Harvard University (1989), Wellek Lectures, Yale University and Plenary Address, Fifth World Shakespeare Congress, Tokyo (1991), Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin Fellowships (1996 and 2003), University Lectures, Princeton University and Plenary Address, Shakespeare Association of America Annual Meeting (1998), Mellon Distinguished Humanist Award (2002), Chair of the Presidential Forum, and of the Annual Meeting of English Department Chairs, MLA (2002), Doctor of Literature, honorary degree, Queen Mary College, University of London (2002),

the William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre, the Shakespeare Theatre, Washington, DC (2005).

Symmetries work even more excitingly within the critical territory demarcated by Stephen Greenblatt, who is constantly aware of moving boundaries and of the necessity to redraw their contours. Leading Renaissance scholar, he is the father of the New Historicism, an interdisciplinary perspective on literature which he defines as a diorama of society, or rather, of a given society under scrutiny. Applied to his particular area of interest, this reads in such fundamental contributions as *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (1988), *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (1990), *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991), *New World Encounters* (1993), *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), this last in collaboration with Catherine Gallagher. A *Greenblatt Reader* published in 2005 sheds recent light on his initial intention to call the new approach 'cultural poetics'.

Undissociable from Shakespeare studies, this is now 'the' way to identify in the famous plays and poetry culturally specific 'givens' covering the whole range from power, with its protocols and practices, to legal procedures, economic and financial institutions, religious values and standards, sexual and emotional taboos, preferences in matters of taste, fashion, eating and drinking – all this, a comprehensive image of actual human societies x-rayed in their multifarious activities. For him the relation holding between literature and history works both ways, with literature impossible to understand other than in historical context, and history reading as literature.

Present from 1982 in his critical vocabulary, 'new historicism' traverses his work, whether in connection with 'the power of forms', 'representations', or 'cultural poetics' proper. An antidote to the 'new criticism', his method underlines the fact that no text exists in a self-sufficient enclave, divorced from the reality out there. Rather, that various forms of cultural production contribute to its making, as it does to theirs. His perspective shares the sociological as it does the anthropological view. Like cultural historians, Stephen Greenblatt addresses topics of relevance for communal identity, from church practices and forms of revenge, to memory, redemption and purgatory, ghosts and symbolic haunting, rebellion and murder. Like intellectual historians, he is sensitive to the percolation of ideas from high to popular and from popular to high culture. As he acknowledges his debt to Foucauldian thinking, he probes into the less documented or even ignored components of the modern episteme in its early modern guises. Like Clifford Geertz, he betrays ethnographic curiosity and adopts a 'thick description' anthropological turn.

Thus enriched, his vision of literature, from fundamental questions of literary history, to 'racial memory' or the Auerbachian accolade, or from 'our literary inheritance' to 'culture'

seen as a 'literary term for literary study' has benefited not only Shakespeare studies with the monumental *Norton Shakespeare* of 1997, but also the vast domain of English literature with the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* which he took over as general editor from M.H. Abrams in 2005. Now is a time for us to receive the benefit of Professor Greenblatt's colossal contribution to the humanities, with the responsibility that the honour we are now conferring upon him confers honour upon us.

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