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All heads turn when Greenblatt enters the room. He has just returned from Japan. In fact, we were probably in Japan at the same time. But I had the obligatory stopover with Northwest airlines in order to save $500.00 and Greenblatt has just viewed the premiere of a version of his play in the East. His walk is the walk of a man who is self-assured, confident about his importance and prepossessed. And why shouldn’t he be? A quick google of ‘Greenblatt, Stephen’ reveals that he is a “brilliant scholar”, “world renowned scholar of renaissance literature”, “eminent scholar and critic”. Greenblatt is the golden boy of academe. Dubbed ‘The Father of New Historicism’, he looks far younger than you would imagine. But then he has had a fortunate life. Poached by Harvard from Berkeley, Greenblatt’s title is officially the ‘Harry Levin Professor of Literature’ and he has the luxury of flying all over the world as a visiting professor and scholar.

I first saw the name ‘Greenblatt’ on the cover of my Norton Anthology of English Literature, but it was with the publication of Hamlet in Purgatory (2001) and Will in the World (2004) that his passion for Shakespeare really caught my attention. Will in the World was on the New York Times Best Seller List for nine weeks, no small feat, and so as I was going to Boston on a field trip with some students, I decided to email Greenblatt and asked him if he would agree to be interviewed. He lists his interests as Shakespeare; Early Modern Literature and Culture; Literature of Travel and Exploration; Religion and Literature; Literature and Anthropology; Literary and Cultural Theory and so I was more than a little intimidated when, being granted an interview, I found myself on a polished wooden chair outside his office door at Harvard.

Greenblatt seems to have a lot of people working for him. There is a busy feeling in the big open plan office. When he arrives, a flock of administrative staff greet Greenblatt and ask him about his trip and his family. He is in no rush and answers their questions in detail before leading me into his office. By contrast, it is incredibly small. He sits behind his desk and I perch on the chair opposite him. There is something easy-going about his demeanour and coupled with his blue jeans and casual top he appears quite affable, but I’m not really that sure that I even rate a blip on his radar. He kicks back nonchalantly putting his feet up on the desk as he continuously throws an eraser in the air. Greenblatt likes to perform, and so it is no wonder that his lectures are packed with students. What is most impressive is the way in which he regards his students, and although he may argue that he does not have a “fantastic vocation as a teacher”, he clearly loves teaching and, more importantly, feels responsibility for his students’ tutelage.

WOE: You have stated: “My students have had a profound impact upon everything I have written.” How do writing and teaching influence one another? Is the connection between you and your students a two way process?

Greenblatt: Yes, of course. It’s a two way process, not only because of the questions the students have and the input that they have—which is considerable—but because the whole idea of a sharp differentiation between the two is artificial. What does one write for in the first place? One writes to communicate with people whom one hopes are interested, and if you can’t, as a teacher, start with your students, then it’s not quite clear with whom you are trying to communicate.
WOE: Is it important for literary critics to work in the academy? There is some discussion that it would be better not to be around students. Dana Gioia has said that academics end up being “gatekeepers of the canon” when they work in a university. Do you feel you have a responsibility for what your students read, what you introduce them to—those sorts of things?

Greenblatt: I obviously have some relation to what they read not only in my courses but also in general as part of the curriculum. I take this seriously and in multiple senses; one of the hats that I wear is as the general editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and that is, for better or worse, one of the principal ways in which the idea of the canon is formed at this point in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. On the whole, however, I have to confess that I think of my enterprise more in the language of pleasure than I do in the language of obligation. I do feel the weight of pedagogical responsibility, but the responsibility has to start with one’s sense of what constitutes a deep and gratifying reading experience for oneself.

I actually learnt this lesson in my first year of teaching at Berkeley many years ago. I assigned something I didn’t like and then I hated teaching it, I hated the whole experience. I realised I should never do that again; I only should teach what gives me pleasure, that is, what I feel I want to grapple with myself. Having said that, I am teaching a course in the fall with a wonderful colleague of mine, Louis Menand, that is essentially a quest for the set of books that we feel all undergraduates should read before they graduate from college. But the “should read” is not about moral obligation but rather is a part of what is exciting about being a human being.

WOE: Over the course of a year how is your time divided between writing and teaching?

Greenblatt: I don’t sharply differentiate between the time I am teaching and the time that I am writing, partly because in the time that I am writing and not teaching I often have graduate students or lots of things that are pedagogical. But then when I am teaching, I try and make time to write. Academics at Harvard have, roughly speaking, fairly light teaching loads and relatively light numbers of hours in the classroom, though many in administrative and other activities. The writing feeds into the teaching and the teaching feeds into the writing.

WOE: Should there be a PhD in creative writing with no theoretical component?

Greenblatt: Off the top of my head, without thinking about it very much, I would be slightly sceptical as to whether to be in a PhD program is the best way of developing one’s skills as a writer. On the other hand, to develop one’s curriculum vitae so that one can get a job, if that’s what it takes, I can see why there’s a strong link there. There are people in this department, creative artists, who have PhDs but they are PhDs in literature. I certainly have plenty of undergraduates who do creative writing theses. I have graduate students who are poets or fiction writers in addition to being academic writers. My relationship to my students is mostly about training people doing scholarly work. I wouldn’t feel comfortable about teaching someone doing a purely creative writing thesis—I wouldn’t know how to assess it, I wouldn’t know how to teach it—but there are people in this department who probably would.

WOE: How do you teach Shakespeare at university? Do you encourage reading aloud or the study of key passages?

Greenblatt: There are lots of different ways; there’s not a single way of doing it. I suppose I would have to say that my default mode is not anything fancy at all except that we usually pick out different scenes in the play and look hard at them to try and see what is going on moment to moment. I sometimes show films or talk about what’s going on in the scenes. Because I am a ham, I like to read things dramatically or talk about what’s going on in the scenes. Because I am a ham, I often try alternative readings can be applied to lines in a play. Also, in the last couple of years I taught a course called Shakespearean Playwriting in which the
students try to write scenes from lost Shakespeare plays or try to figure out what he does and try to imitate it and play with imitating it. So that would be another way of not only getting people to see that Shakespeare is an extraordinary genius but also that he has a set of skills—students can figure out what that skill set is, what the choices that he is making are, what he likes and what he doesn’t like to do. This is one of the ways of doing an assignment.

**WOE:** I have read that students have abandoned other courses to choose your course because of your readings and teaching methods. How do you inspire students?

**Greenblatt:** I love teaching but I think it is quite hard to teach. I enjoy it and I know very well that there are people that have extraordinary and genuine vocations as teachers, magical vocations—when you see it you know what it is. I think I am OK at what I do and I take it seriously and take my responsibility for it seriously and take pleasure in it, but I don’t regard myself as having some kind of fantastic vocation. When I was an undergraduate, one of my teachers was Vincent Scully, an art historian who was just amazing. I couldn’t quite believe what he was doing—he was so passionate and dramatic and his lectures poured out of him as if it was effortless for him to speak that way. I love it when I see it but I don’t think I have that gift.

**WOE:** About your first experience reading Shakespeare you have said, “Though I have spent much of my adult life thinking about Shakespeare, my first encounter with Shakespeare was a disaster. In junior high school I found *As You Like It* quite possibly the most tedious and annoying thing I had ever read.”

**Greenblatt:** I must have been thirteen or fourteen and I was too young—it is a very sophisticated play. It is always hard to understand the choices that people make for teaching small children Shakespeare. But *As You Like It*—which I think is a marvellous play—strikes me as a very dodgy choice.

**WOE:** How do you recommend instilling a love of Shakespeare in high school students so they are not soured by the experience?

**Greenblatt:** Having just said that, I would add that if a teacher is powerful enough, almost anything—even the phone book—can come across as an ineffable thing. It’s very hard for me to say what the rule for it is, except that it helps if you actually care about the thing, better yet if you are passionately in love with the subject. Looking back on my *As You Like It* class I just can’t imagine that Miss Gillespie, if I am remembering her name correctly, cared about this play at all since it was a dull class. But a few years later I had a crack at *King Lear*, which certainly must be a harder play to teach than *As You Like It*, and I found it incredibly thrilling. The teacher had a tremendous gift and he engaged in a vigorous and brooding way which remains with me now, some forty five years later, as a vision of what it is actually to communicate to people—why it matters, why caring about the play actually matters. What I remember from that particular experience, which was with a teacher named John Harris who is dead now, was that he was quite humble in relation to the text. There were moments in which he couldn’t understand what was happening and admitted to us that he didn’t quite know what was going on, didn’t pretend that he knew it. When I was at school the thing that I found most depressing was the air of the teacher who knew absolutely everything—there was no struggle involved in understanding a thing and it was all somehow recollected in tranquillity. I like people who are actually wrestling with learning.

**WOE:** You’ve said, “The idea that you need an advanced degree to understand Shakespeare is a joke.” Why do you think Shakespeare’s works are considered so difficult? Are people unwilling to struggle with a text anymore?
Greenblatt: Well, I don’t know why I said that Shakespeare isn’t difficult. Of course, in some ways he is difficult because the stuff was written a long time ago in 1600. By the time you reach 2000, the language has changed, and his rhetoric is very dense and complicated. What I meant, I suppose, is that even after such a long time Shakespeare can be graspable by an enormously wide range of people—elementary school children and high school students and so forth can watch and understand with enormous pleasure. But it does usually involve watching and performing the play more than reading. Reading Shakespeare is hard for anyone, so that I think the first thing to say with Shakespeare is that his plays were written to be performed. Simply giving the text to someone who is fifteen- or sixteen-years old and saying “read” is a little bit like opening a score to Cosi Fan Tutte and saying, “now enjoy Mozart.” You could reach a point in which you could open the score and take pleasure in it, but it’s easier if you have actually heard Cosi Fan Tutte first. In most of Shakespeare’s plays there is an enormous range of things you can see. If I were teaching in high school I would certainly make heavy use of the fact that you can watch these things being performed. Romeo and Juliet can be difficult but once you’ve seen Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio, you get something out of it, even if you do not grasp the whole.

WOE: What do you think of modern adaptations of Shakespeare?

Greenblatt: On adaptations and modernisations and transformations of the plays, I’m not actually someone who feels that it is very important to leave the plays alone and not do things with them. The way and spirit in which Shakespeare’s plays are written involves manhandling. The plays were written to be transformed—that doesn’t mean we should forget about the scripts that we have from four hundred years ago—but I think that it is fair game to do anything you want with them. They can be a disaster as well. In film, in particular, often what happens is that one loses a lot of the play in order to substitute a kind of visual experience that will somehow convey what needs to be conveyed. You can’t possibly fill it with all the words. One should probably not fight too strongly against that but accept that as the nature of the medium.

WOE: You have discussed in interviews the importance of resonance and wonder. Is it hard after spending a lifetime thinking about Shakespeare to stay in touch with the wonder?

Greenblatt: Something that is implicit in your question seems to me to be inherently true, and that is if you’ve taught the same thing eight thousand times it gets rather more difficult to still feel the full force of it as if you were reading it for the first time. You can pretend that you do and every once in a while the pretence itself can be rather regenerating, but it is definitely harder to keep the freshness, and I don’t pretend that it is not. On the other hand, there is a huge amount of Shakespeare, and even though I have worked for years in this field, it turns out that there are all kinds of things that completely take me by surprise. Often this happens in performance. I always have this experience that even in a mediocre performance of a play I see something that I didn’t know was there—something perhaps in an intonation—suddenly I see that what looked like a familiar rock has been broken open and there’s a crystal inside that you didn’t know was there. That is a way of recovering or regenerating things that you thought you knew too well. You get to know certain things very, very well so that they can be resonant for you. In the sense of taking your breath away, this experience diminishes. But then you can often recover it in the performance.

WOE: I am taken with your discussion of doing your work “through techniques of association, analogy, surprising connection, things contingently leaning against each other, collage.” Why do you think that criticism has moved from textual to contextual interpretation?

Greenblatt: There are a number of different explanations. One of these was a growing resistance to the assumption, implicit in traditional close reading, that there is a single group of specialists who control the life of the imagination, who are its masters. That is, textual interpretation tended to wall
off the works of artists deemed worthy of serious attention from all other forms of expression and to imply that no one else can even begin to play the game, let alone justify sustained analysis. I think that this impulse to isolate has given way to something else. Contextual interpretation does not abandon the recognition of genius, but it understands that any artistic game that’s well played is almost always enormously wide-spread, not only in works of art but also in lots of other life experience—that is why it actually reaches people. So the first step and finally the last step for any contextual work is to understand that the imagination is not walled off in the special objects we call literature, but the life of the imagination goes on everywhere. The question is how to tap into that and how to share the life of the imagination, put it in contact with these objects. A contextual work’s success or power has to do with the democratisation of the idea of the imagination and feeling that it is not only a handful of artists and their professorial expositors who control this thing—it is not actually under anyone’s control, it is there in the collective life of our societies. I love that feeling. Actually, sometimes it’s scary—after all, literature is full of accounts of terror and hatred as well as joy and love. But the truth of the matter is that people live lives that are not driven solely by rational calculation but by extraordinary, very strange acts of the imagination. Literary objects are uniquely in touch with those, but they are in touch with those precisely because they are spread so widely.

**WOE:** Who do you admire among Shakespeare scholars?

**Greenblatt:** Huge numbers. There are a million people who are doing wonderful work on Shakespeare. If we are talking not only of specialist works but also of books that reach a broader public, I just read with great pleasure Jim Shapiro’s book called *A Year In The Life of William Shakespeare*. My former teacher Harold Bloom has certainly managed to reach a very broad reading public. Then within the world of the academy there are unending numbers of people doing wonderful things of more specialised kind. I greatly admire Margreta de Grazia at the University of Pennsylvania; Julia Lupton, a relatively young person at the University of California, published a remarkable book recently on citizenship and Shakespeare; Paul Kottman, a still younger theorist and scholar at the New School in New York; and the list goes on.

**WOE:** *Will in the World* illustrates the importance of the historical context of Shakespeare's life and work. Were you surprised by the popular reaction to the book?

**Greenblatt:** I was delighted of course. I hoped it was going to be a success, but the fact that it reached a very, very broad public and was well received made me enormously happy, and it did surprise me. It surprised me a little bit for the same reason that the success of the movie *Shakespeare In Love* surprised me—what was amazing to me about *Shakespeare In Love* was that millions of people became involved in what was fundamentally a literary question, how is it possible for this person to go from being the author of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to being the author of *Romeo and Juliet*? The movie’s answer was a creative one: Gwyneth Paltrow. But behind Gwyneth Paltrow is the sense that there must have been something in his life as well as his talent that enabled him to do what he did. In effect that is what *Will in the World* articulated as well, that there’s something about the way he was in his world, about his interactions, about how that world was in addition to the native genius that he had that must help us to understand what he did.

Sometimes Harold Bloom gets on a very high horse about these responses and about me. I don’t have any problem with Harold Bloom—he was my teacher, I respect and admire him—and I have no problem with the quasi-hierophantic, theological feelings that he generates towards Shakespeare, as he rolls his eyes up and says “This was God; this was a great genius.” Shakespeare was an astonishing genius, that seems true, even a truism, but the question is what is the relationship between that genius and the world he was living in? What kind of life was he living? Whom did he love? Whom did he hate? Whom was he afraid of? Who amused him? What did he care about? How did he get a sense of his vocation? How did he do what he did? So that was the
set of questions that very much provoked me and I was delighted that it worked in its form because the general reading public has a largely untapped passionate interest in literature but a deep resistance towards what we normally write as literary criticism. This kind of work is generally not read at all except by people forced to by assigning it to them. And that is crazy. It is crazy on our part since we should actually figure out a way of addressing the genuine interest that people have. It is not an academic interest, it’s not because they have been assigned it, but because they care about it.

The mistake is to think that you have to sacrifice your intelligence to write clearly because you can actually write very complex things in clear prose. The world is full of people who have done it. This tradition starts with Shakespeare’s own achievement, but extends to many other people.

**WOE:** What are you working on now? I read that you were in Japan and had co-written a play.

**Greenblatt:** It was fascinating. With a playwright named Charles Mee, I wrote a play called *Cardenio* based on Shakespeare’s lost play, but ours is set now in the twenty-first century. I look forward to seeing the English language premiere in the United States this spring, but this was not my only interest in the project. Because my concern is cultural mobility, I contacted a range of theatre companies in different places and made a proposal to them. I said our play could not be directly translated but that it could be adapted and transformed. My goal was to see what happened when it moved from one culture to another. I saw a production in Japan by a wonderful playwright called Akio Miyazawa and a production in Bengali in Calcutta, with ones coming up in Croatian in Zagreb and in Spanish in Madrid. It seems to me fascinating to see what happens when it moves around from one culture to another. [*He holds up the Japanese poster.*] They called it *Motorcycle Don Quixote* (not my idea but I can’t complain because I got into it for precisely this purpose to see what would happen to it when it got moved around from one place to another). I engaged in this whole project partly to get at what I take to be Shakespeare’s own practice and also what’s happened to Shakespeare. That is to say, his own practice very much involves taking things and transforming them, making them other than they were, borrowing from them but also making them no longer resemble what they were when he began. I wanted to set up a kind of experimental space in which I could watch this process of metamorphosis happen with the text that Charles Mee and I wrote, and that’s what has happened.