

# AN IMITATIVE INDUSTRY: CREATING TYRANTS AFTER T.<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article begins by addressing a persistent question about creativity in literary criticism: can literary criticism ever be a creative industry or is it condemned to be an uncreative one, locked in a repetitious secondary place in relation to the texts that it writes about? As a way out of this problem, this article proposes that literary criticism can be best understood as a form of imitative writing, in the specific terms used by Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesy*. It is argued that Sidney's definition of poesy can be used to describe important aspects of the forms and purposes of literary criticism today. This argument is illustrated by a recent instance of "imitative literary criticism," Stephen Greenblatt's *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power* (2018), which intervenes in North-American politics through an analysis of tyrants and their enablers in Shakespeare. In a dramatic tour-de-force, Greenblatt's book focuses indirectly on the figure of Donald Trump without ever naming the then President of the United States. This article discusses why this is done and focuses on issues of imitation, exemplarity, and emulation in his book, while taking into account the history of Greenblatt's engagement with Shakespeare's "oblique angles."

**Keywords:** Literary criticism; imitation; creativity; emulation; Sir Philip Sidney; William Shakespeare; Stephen Greenblatt; Donald Trump.

## Industries, Creative and Uncreative

"Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture – with this end: to teach and delight."<sup>2</sup> Sir

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy" (1595), *Sidney's "The Defence of Poesy" and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (London and New York: Penguin, 2004) 10.

Philip Sidney's definition of poesy, the object of literary criticism, differentiates poesy from other discourses, which, in Sidney's case, are philosophy and history. But where does this leave a discourse such as Sidney's? As a defence, it exists within the rhetorical framework that Sidney also applies to poesy. In addition, acknowledging the common pursuit of persuading and moving readers and spectators in both rhetoric and poesy, Sidney jokes that "Methinks I deserve to be pounded for straying from poetry to oratory"; "both have such an affinity in the wordish consideration" that his object becomes momentarily unclear.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in true poetical and rhetorical mode, he himself begins his defence with "a speaking picture," or, as we might call it, resonating with our post-new-historicist times, an anecdote, a method he recommends throughout, but, most appropriately for Shakespeareans, when he praises the example of Menenius Agrippa telling the fable of the belly to the seceded people of Rome; instead of coming among them with "figurative speeches or cunning insinuations, and much less with far-fet maxims of philosophy [...], he behaves himself like a homely and familiar poet."<sup>4</sup> So does Sidney, who, in a form of hybrid literary theory that mixes historical examples and philosophical maxims, straddles the boundaries between historiography and philosophy, much like his chosen object, which brings together the best of both. In order to define and characterize poetry by alleging to defend it, Sidney sweetens the pill of poetics, which in other writers can be a bitter pill indeed to swallow, thus delighting while teaching, and teaching not just poetics but how, by poesy and in his own defence, one should "show Virtue her own feature" (*Hamlet*, III.ii.22).<sup>5</sup>

If Sidney's literary theory and criticism have all this in common with his purported primary object, poesy, could they additionally be "an art of imitation"? Criticism certainly needs to call for itself a relation with reality more solid than that of "a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth." That is, criticism cannot leave behind "affirming." As Sidney slyly puts it, in his distinction between poesy and other types of discourses, "the Poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth, for, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true, which is false."<sup>6</sup> Unlike poesy, criticism and theory cannot simply argue themselves into being beyond true and false, although Sidney is also being somewhat disingenuous, given that one of his examples is Thomas More's *Utopia*:<sup>7</sup> plenty of literature has vigorously affirmed itself to be true, to the point of it being one more poetic convention, with travels

<sup>3</sup> Sidney 51.

<sup>4</sup> Sidney 24.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Sidney 34.

<sup>7</sup> See Sidney 17.

to non-existing islands presented as true accounts, novels presented as autobiographies or lives and opinions, and a plethora of found manuscripts written in the comfort of their finders' studies.

So how about imitation? From imitation as mimesis or representation, via imitation as *imitatio* or the use of models of writing, to imitation as the reader's emulation of a model of virtue,<sup>8</sup> criticism has also dwelt in these parts, figuring forth objects in the poems and plays that it analyses (objects which will hopefully be plausible and universal or generalizable), and, in respect to decorum and form, adapting its style to its matter and fora, although as a rule avoiding imitative form, while, in more morally zealous or politically fraught moments, offering inspirational ethical models or pointing to vicious figures meant to be ostracized.

Imitation has ceased to be a manifest value for poetry, undervalued in the name of originality; however, it has more and more become a value in criticism. This is to say, as T.S. Eliot does in "The Function of Criticism," that one should not entertain "the preposterous assumption that criticism is an autotelic activity."<sup>9</sup> Eliot cleverly pre-empts the question of whether "a large part of what is called 'critical writing' [might] really [be] creative," by arguing that criticism must be about *other* works, not about itself (though he does so in an essay *about* "The Function of Criticism"). To support this, Eliot proposes that criticism has to do with facts, however infinitely qualified, which need only be presented so that the function of criticism may be properly fulfilled: to arrive "at something outside of ourselves, which may provisionally be called truth," if such a thing does exist, Eliot adds.<sup>10</sup> But, once the normative function of criticism is established, Eliot must sound a pragmatic note to point out that, in fact, most criticism aiming to interpret a work or an author has indeed been a fictional exercise: "And for every success in this type of writing there are thousands of impostures. Instead of insight, you get a fiction."<sup>11</sup>

Fictional or not, affirming truth or surrendering to post-truth, it must be *about something else* (even if only other criticism), and, in this sense at least, it is imitative. The late Terence Hawkes addressed this issue in an important essay called "The Heimlich Manoeuvre," in which he follows on Eliot's essay and especially Matthew Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." Halfway through the essay, Hawkes quotes Michel Foucault on the topic of primary and

<sup>8</sup> See Gavin Alexander, "Introduction," Sidney's "The Defence of Poesy" and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism, xxxiv.

<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 24.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot 34.

<sup>11</sup> Eliot 32.

secondary discourses. Foucault first denies that there should be, “on the one side, the category of fundamental or creative discourses, given for all time, and on the other, the mass of discourses which repeat, gloss, and comment,” but then affirms that the “principle of a differentiation” between primary text and secondary commentary, though “never stable, nor constant, nor absolute,” is nevertheless ineradicable and therefore always put into play. The commentary repeats, but paradoxically so, since it must “say for the first time what had, nonetheless, already been said, and must tirelessly repeat what had, however, never been said.”<sup>12</sup> Repetition is thus secondary to an unstated primary utterance, unstated because, in the primary text, it is never said in the form that is later articulated by the critic. Based on this idea, Hawkes argues that “criticism (which may appear to be secondary, merely repetitive) has at least a prima-facie case also to be seen as primary. Or rather, the whole primary – secondary relationship begins to seem ungroundable.”<sup>13</sup>

Hawkes additionally calls on a famous inversion of attribution of creativity, in Oscar Wilde’s two-part “The Critic as Artist,” in which Gilbert says that “Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name,”<sup>14</sup> thus, according to Hawkes, “award[ing] to criticism [...] a primary, not a secondary role.”<sup>15</sup> Wilde’s essay is an essential contribution to the argument that criticism is not a merely derivative endeavour and it is worth dwelling on it for a moment. In it, the idea of criticism as an imitative art is constantly challenged, as is the idea of creativity when applied to art, not criticism. Although this may sound wilfully contrarian, I would like to argue that the views expressed by Gilbert in the essay can in fact be made to contribute to an understanding of criticism as imitation.

Halfway through the first part of the essay, Gilbert declares that “it is the critical faculty that invents fresh forms. The tendency of creation is to repeat itself.” (254) This is later turned into a rejection of imitation or resemblance as standards by which to judge a piece of criticism (260). In fact, the use of subject-matter in criticism (by which is meant a work of art which is discussed critically) is compared with the use of materials in novels or paintings (261) and finally equated with what poetry does:

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Hawkes 12.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 253. Further references to this edition are given in the text in parentheses.

<sup>15</sup> Hawkes 19.

[Criticism] works with materials, and puts them into a form that is at once new and delightful. What more can one say of poetry? Indeed, I would call criticism a creation within a creation. For just as the great artists, from Homer and Aeschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale, so the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him, and to which imaginative form and colour have been already added.

(261)

Gilbert is thus led to find criticism to be more creative the more it uses previous materials; paradoxically, “the critic reproduces the work that he criticizes in a mode that is never imitative, and part of whose charm may really consist in the rejection of resemblance.” (266) In the second part of the essay, he goes on to describe the critic as “he who exhibits to us a work of art in a form different from that of the work itself, and the employment of a new material is a critical as well as a creative element.” (269) Gilbert’s own paradoxes suggest that what he means by creative criticism might also correspond to what is here meant by criticism, and especially presentist criticism, as an imitative art, that is, as something that manifestly works from previous material, but which does so under the awareness that, as in the Renaissance understanding of imitation, it is always adding to the original meaning or material, even if only by paraphrasing it. Gilbert’s notion that the critic “will be always showing us the work of art in some new relation to our age” (269) makes it clearer why Terence Hawkes quotes him in an essay about criticism as a series of interventions in the present. For Hawkes, this way of understanding criticism puts essays like Arnold’s or Eliot’s “on the syllabus, with a standing equal to that of their so-called ‘creative writing’” and aims to expand “the possibilities of our *use* of criticism as a material intervention into history, rather than the prosecution of what we misguidedly think of as scholarly ‘facts’ or ‘truth.’”<sup>16</sup>

I would therefore propose that criticism, repeating what was never there, as a means of intervening in history, is imitation in Sidney’s and the Renaissance’s sense, imitating not what happened, but creating by addressing previous forms, proposing what is plausible from a reading of the text, what may or could have been there, in some cases even challenging texts in the name of what should have happened or taking aim at words that should not have been written. Whatever its varieties, this criticism is evidently presentist, and Hawkes’s argument is explicitly

<sup>16</sup> Hawkes 20.

about presentism as a rationale for criticism. Criticism, especially presentist criticism,<sup>17</sup> is therefore an imitative industry in the Renaissance sense of imitation: it is a part of a creative industry presenting itself as always coming second in relation to a previous text.

### Angela Merkel's Summer Reading

One recent author can be seen to have been following Sidney's *Defence* very closely in his own creative imitation of Renaissance models. This particular author followed the model of a book that Sidney recommends, *The Mirror for Magistrates*,<sup>18</sup> which shows the ambitious rise and hard fall of governors, tyrants, enablers, and hangers-on, according to the well-known *De casibus* tradition. This author's goal was to portray the forms and moments of the workings of fortune, elevating and dropping those who seek power and those who support them, but the book did so by representing the work of another author, which becomes the model for an understanding of present rises and falls. The goal was to produce moral examples: virtuous models to follow and vicious cases to shun. In this, the book stressed one of the advantages of poetry and philosophy over history. Whereas history must acknowledge that in the real world wickedness is often rewarded, not punished, poetry and philosophy can imagine tyrants falling, poetry by devising punishments, sometimes even in hell, and philosophy by arguing "occidendos esse," that is, that tyrants must be killed.<sup>19</sup> This the book does by focusing mostly on the genre that Sidney singles out as the best for exposing tyrants: tragedy, which "maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours."<sup>20</sup>

Not long after the book was published, its ideal reader, a high magistrate, was photographed reading it. The book hidden behind Angela Merkel's balcony railings in a photo from August 2019<sup>21</sup> is Stephen Greenblatt's *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power*. Merkel, with an air of concentration and holding a finger to her mouth, is reading the German translation, whose title is less mysterious in relation to what

<sup>17</sup> Presentists have repeatedly suggested that no criticism is exempt from being presentist in one way or another. I have recently expanded on this idea in Miguel Ramalheite Gomes, "Presentist Studies," *The Arden Research Handbook of Contemporary Shakespeare Criticism*, ed. Evelyn Gajowski (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) 237-38.

<sup>18</sup> See Sidney 44.

<sup>19</sup> Sidney 21.

<sup>20</sup> Sidney 27.

<sup>21</sup> The photo can be found in a tweet by journalist Philip Olterman, <https://twitter.com/philipoltermann/status/1158989071672389633>.

is at stake in the book: *Der Tyrann: Shakespeares Machtkunde für das 21. Jahrhundert* (Shakespeare's Study of Power for the Twenty-First Century).

*Tyrant* was marketed as a contribution to "understanding our most urgent contemporary dilemmas," because what Shakespeare shows about the tyrant's sociology and psychology "remains remarkably relevant today," the flap announces.<sup>22</sup> The book participates in a tendency, already some years old, to write Shakespearean criticism that is at the same time a demonstration of earnest indignation with the election of Trump in 2016.<sup>23</sup> *Tyrant* has remained, however, a vaguely embarrassing book because it displays its presentism so blatantly, that is, its tendency to interpret the Elizabethan past in the light of present categories.

Within Shakespeare studies, there is an actual presentist current, to be found in the work of critics such as Terence Hawkes, Hugh Grady and Evelyn Gajowski, and which, in Hawkes's words, declares that

Its project is scrupulously to seek out salient aspects of the present as a crucial trigger for its investigations. Reversing, to some degree, the stratagems of new historicism, it deliberately begins with the material present and allows that to set its interrogative agenda. Perhaps this simply makes overt what covertly happens anyway.<sup>24</sup>

*This* presentism has been practised from an awareness that, on the one hand, it is an extension of certain anachronisms that were productive to new historicism and, on the other hand, that it was trying to gain academic legitimacy in a hegemonically historicist space; this is particularly visible in the degree of caution with which, in the work of these authors, the past is codified by means of concepts from the present.

Greenblatt's case is noticeably different. Written for a wider audience, the book regularly displays anachronisms and comparisons aiming to make the past not a strange place, or a foreign country, in the words of L.P. Hartley, but a familiar one:

Like the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, the beheading of Mary on February 8, 1587, did not end the threat of terrorism in England;

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Power* (New York: Norton, 2018).

<sup>23</sup> In *Shakespeare and Trump*, Jeffrey R. Wilson calls this tendency "Public Shakespeare," by which many Shakespearians, especially in the United States, took a more public stance in an effort to address their current political moment through Shakespeare. Wilson connects this tendency to Terence Hawkes' presentism and points out that "[p]ublic Shakespearians are not studying appropriation but actively doing it." Jeffrey R. Wilson, *Shakespeare and Trump* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2020) 65.

<sup>24</sup> Hawkes 22.

This is a show trial, in the manner of Henry VIII or, in our own time, Stalin;

It is as if the leader of a political party long identified with hatred of Russia – forever saber-rattling and accusing the rival politicians of treason – should secretly make his way to Moscow and offer his services to the Kremlin.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, out of these quotes, only the last one could be read as an allusion to Trump. In fact, Greenblatt is careful to insert comparisons which are sufficiently dispersed to keep a wide field of references. Other references, with their echoes of speeches and expressions of American political life of the years preceding the book's publication, are more direct: "He promises to make England great again"; "the voice of an alternative right-hand file"; "they think that such fears are fake news."<sup>26</sup> Above all, it is the portrait that Greenblatt draws of Richard III, but also of Jack Cade, the populist rebel from *Henry VI, Part 2*, which confirms the purpose of the book: to display the strategies for obtaining and exercising tyrannical power, as represented in Shakespeare, but above all, to tie Trump to Richard III and Jack Cade, who are only occasionally treated as the characters that they are.

On the one hand, the book was moderately well received among colleagues engaged in Shakespearean anti-Trump activism; on the other hand, the book's ostentatious presentism caused discomfort. Yet what is most striking about *Tyrant* is that at no point does Greenblatt mention Trump's name. The only indirect mention to a context for the writing of the book appears in the acknowledgments, at the end:

Not so very long ago, though it feels like a century has passed, I sat in a verdant garden in Sardinia and expressed my growing apprehensions about the possible outcome of an upcoming election. My historian friend Bernhard Jussen asked me what I was doing about it. "What can I do?" I asked. "You can write something," he said. And so I did.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the overly privileged setting of the "verdant garden in Sardinia," this level of concealment is odd and, in an interview given to the newspaper *Der Spiegel*, motivated precisely by the photograph of Merkel reading the book, the journalist, Susanne Beyer, suggested that Merkel might have staged the scene captured by the photograph and asked Greenblatt why he never mentioned Trump even once in the book:

<sup>25</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 11, 132, 178.

<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 41, 162, 179.

<sup>27</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 191.

DER SPIEGEL: If the chancellor wanted to make a statement with her reading choice, then it was an indirect one. Your book also makes indirect statements considering that it doesn't contain a single reference to Trump. Why?

GREENBLATT: Look, we all talk about Trump all the time. The fact that we're so fixated on him is part of the problem. [...] We want to keep watching the tyrant, even though we know he's acting destructively. That's how we stabilize his power, and that's why I'm not fond of talking about Trump himself.<sup>28</sup>

It is true that talking about the person and the spectacle that the person produces contributes to that same spectacle. But, while reasonable, the argument does not exactly explain why Trump's name is *entirely* absent from the book. On the one hand, it is clear that Trump remains present in the expressions that have become attached to him and that Greenblatt evokes; we know that it is Trump that Greenblatt speaks of, not just Richard III, and this, it could be argued, might still contribute to the noise; on the other hand, there is something of a *tour de force* in a book like this, which can sustain a dense tissue of allusions without once telling what it is aiming at.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Susanne Beyer, "We're Fascinated by the Tyrant. Merkel's Summer Reading," *Spiegel International*, 26 August 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/angela-merkel-s-summer-reading-we-re-fascinated-by-the-tyrant-a-1283007.html>. The interview makes for fascinating reading, also because of a certain dissonance between the reporter's assumption that things can be openly said and the way Greenblatt theatrically insists on not naming names, as in the following, slightly odd passage: "DER SPIEGEL: [...] How did we get to a point where we are forced to use symbols when communicating with each other again? GREENBLATT: Of course, in Western democracies, we no longer have to communicate as indirectly as Shakespeare once did out of sheer self-protection. We have other options. [...] With the authoritarian regimes of our time, we are seeing frightening relapses into this old pattern. Here, I'm thinking of a reporter who didn't shy away from speaking openly about his government, went to his consulate and was cut to pieces there... DER SPIEGEL: The suspicion that journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered last year at the Saudi Arabian Consulate in Istanbul at the behest of the Saudi crown prince, right?" Beyer, "We're Fascinated by the Tyrant."

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey R. Wilson connects this refusal to name the target to a request at the end of a performance in Shakespeare's Globe in July 2018, when Trump was visiting London, in which spectators were asked to "speak and act against those like our visitor to the U.K. this weekend, He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named." Wilson comments, correctly in my view, that "this strategy of not-naming feels immature, and weirdly aligned with witchcraft superstitions (hence the Harry Potter reference). It does not empower Trump to name him." Wilson 9-10. Indeed, the refusal to even name Trump, followed by attempts to use

## The Oblique Angler

The argument that Greenblatt was simply avoiding the noise and the spectacle that appropriates everything written in response to it is not very convincing. Instead, Greenblatt may be seen to have been playing a character like the ones he wrote about in his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which brilliantly discussed a set of oblique strategies applied to the creation of *personas*, namely by Thomas More, Thomas Wyatt and others. According to the book's introduction, "in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process."<sup>30</sup> Greenblatt develops the idea that this shaping of the self – being a consequence of external pressures –, although more visible in literary texts, does not allow a clear separation between literature and life (3). In the most remarkable chapter of the book, Greenblatt draws attention to the difficulty that biographers of Thomas More had in dealing with the ease with which More both exhibits a public persona, someone about whom More can ask himself "What would 'More' say about this?" (31), and a scepticism and profound irony in the face of a dissimulation that no one seems to believe in, but that everyone practices at court. In this game of selves, of personas that none of the practitioners believe in, Greenblatt finds More surviving based on an acute awareness that the self is a construct (57) but also on the existence of a space in which thoughts could be private (45). The high point of this game of fictions is *Utopia*, in the clash between Morus, More's public persona, diplomatic and willing to participate in the fictions of power, and Hythlodæus, a fiction composed of what More's public figure is not, but that refuses to accept the fictions of power (34-36). To play the game of power, for Morus, is a duty of the philosopher, but this makes necessary an indirect approach, an "obliquus ductus" (67), the usefulness of which Hythlodæus says he does not even understand, and this because dissimulation is of no use at court, as only the worst advice and the vilest policies pay off. According to the first English translation, by Ralph Robinson (1551-1556),

For that crafty wile and subtle train [obliquus ille ductus] of yours, I cannot perceive to what purpose it serveth [...]. For there is no place to dissemble

roundabout expressions to refer to the unnameable taboo, suggests an aura of magical thinking, as if the mere mention of certain words had a demonic power which needed to be avoided.

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) 2. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

in nor to wink in. Naughty counsels must *be openly allowed* [*approbanda sunt aperte pessima consilia*] and very pestilent decrees must be approved.<sup>31</sup>

For More (not Morus), according to Greenblatt, dissimulation at court hides nothing, exposing only the absurdity of practitioners who are possessed by fantasies and no longer distinguish between fiction and reality (15). But, for Hythlodæus, there is no place for dissimulation at court, since the worst is “openly allowed.” More’s adaptability, however, does not guarantee his survival, and, throughout the rest of the book, Greenblatt turns to other players who engage with others obliquely, putting selves in play, theirs or those of their characters.

Greenblatt writes in the introduction that there is a personal principle that applies to the book as a whole: “it is everywhere evident in this book that the questions I ask of my material and indeed the very nature of this material are shaped by the questions I ask of myself.” (5) This presence of a strong authorial figure is reinforced by a small personal anecdote about a pickpocket in Naples in the chapter on Marlowe (216) and above all in the book’s epilogue, in which Greenblatt becomes the protagonist of a short story, in which, during a conversation on an airplane, he refuses to say a phrase that he is asked to repeat. A preface, added in 2005, insists on this dimension, starting by saying that “*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* was the book in which I first found my voice.” (xi) Greenblatt goes on to rehearse a brief autobiography focused on intellectual development and changing political commitment in the 1970s, and adds that, in the book, there are purposeful echoes between events from the sixteenth century and events of the 1970s. The personal dimension of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, present in this voice and in the inclusion of small autobiographical narratives in other essays and books in which he appears to bare himself, would become a distinctive element of Greenblatt’s writing and would influence the writing of several other new historicists. Part of the interest in reading Greenblatt comes precisely from this critical *persona* of his, the way a self is put in play, presenting itself as a confessional critic of Shakespeare calling attention to the fact that his voice is a construct.

But Greenblatt is not emulating just More in *Tyrant*; another emulated character, and one closer to us than Thomas More, is the Polish Shakespearean critic Jan Kott, author of a rare critical bestseller with *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, originally published in 1961 and later in English translation in

<sup>31</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia, Three Early Modern Utopias*. Thomas More, *Utopia*; Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*; Henry Neville, *The Isle of Pines*, ed. Susan Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 43. Emphasis added.

1964.<sup>32</sup> Kott's book proposed a reading of Shakespeare marked by the Polish present on the other side of the Iron Curtain, in which Stalin and Stalinism were allegorized in several of the tyrants and their followers in Shakespeare. Shortly after the English publication of the book, Kott followed the example of other dissidents and went into exile in the United States. Although somewhat passed over nowadays, Kott's book remains a reference, above all perhaps for the political symbol it represents: a book of Shakespearean criticism written in a moment of real difficulty by someone who could claim to have first-hand knowledge of what Shakespeare was referring to when he wrote about Richard III or Macbeth, and not just another monograph of derogatorily 'academic' interest.

Greenblatt's book can be read as an attempt to emulate Kott's book, to replicate its effect on the present. In *Tyrant*, Greenblatt praises Shakespeare's strategy; referring to his "oblique angle"<sup>33</sup> and declaring that "Shakespeare was the supreme master of displacement and strategic indirection."<sup>34</sup> What is at stake here in terms of authorial strategy is what was at stake in Kott: the ability to write about the present in the guise of the past. By omitting Trump's name and only mentioning the origins of the book in the acknowledgments, Greenblatt is thus spelling out his own strategy when he praises Shakespeare's. In this indirect approach, it is as if Greenblatt were Thomas More under Henry VIII, or Jan Kott censoring himself under the weight of Stalinism, and a similar comparison is actually made in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, when Greenblatt writes that "conversation with the king himself [that is, Henry VIII] must have been like small talk with Stalin."<sup>35</sup> But this more cautious and periphrastic persona in *Tyrant* is not matched with a situation of censorship, a censorship that would be exposed by the very need to hide the final meanings of the text. As a trick of style, it is a misleading strategy, because it seems to denounce political oppression by suggesting that it is

<sup>32</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York: Norton, 1974).

<sup>33</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 3.

<sup>34</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 14. As Urszula Kizelbach has noted, this view is already pervasive in Greenblatt's biography of Shakespeare, *Will in the World*: "Greenblatt's literary biography aims to reveal a Shakespeare who hides himself behind the verses of his plays and who, throughout his life, acts as a master of disguise." This is because Greenblatt credits the theory of Shakespeare's crypto-Catholicism which is said to have generated a form of "double consciousness" in his family. Urszula Kizelbach, "Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare the Biography* and Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World*, or Facts and Fiction about William Shakespeare," *Reinventing the Renaissance: Shakespeare and His Contemporaries in Adaptation and Performance*, ed. Sarah Annes Brown, Robert I. Lublin and Lynsey McCulloch (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 92, 99.

<sup>35</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 136-37.

necessary to protect a subversive sense of the text. In the absence of such censorship, this disguised subversion is no more than a simulation.

### The Antiquarian and the Early Modernist

This brings us to one of the recurring traits of Shakespeare studies since the 1980s: the idea that the critical essay that finds subversion in Shakespeare is itself subversive, in a variation of the fallacy of imitative form that we might call the fallacy of imitative subversion. Greenblatt famously discussed this issue with great clarity in the essay "Invisible Bullets," in which he approaches the relation between subversion and containment in the English Renaissance, only to place the subversive potential of this discussion firmly in the past, by adapting a sentence by Kafka on hope: "There is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us."<sup>36</sup> In a way, Greenblatt is right: the subversion that we find in Shakespeare is always a subversion that will comfort us and our beliefs; it never subverts us, only *them*, the others, if only they listened. Yet *Tyrant* returns to the idea that Shakespeare can be subversive in the present. However, the omission of Trump's name suggests a strategy of concealment that is no longer that of contemporary politics, with its cult of transparency and the seriousness of its moral indignation, unveiling and exposing what was previously hidden. Greenblatt contributed to this culture through the elaboration of a confessional critical self, but *Tyrant* paradoxically reveals a nostalgia for a historical moment in which writing had real consequences, hence the need for cover and for the disappearance of his earlier persona. It is not by accident that the book's coda begins with a gruesome description of "severe punishments for acts of speech and writing."<sup>37</sup>

The desire to be subversive and, through oblique means, to convey a message that could be interpreted by the tyrant, but difficult to prove, because deniable, is revealed precisely in a chapter entitled "Oblique Angles." There, Greenblatt recounts a well-known episode of the English Renaissance. In February 1601, the Earl of Essex – once a favourite of the Queen but fallen out of favour due to his military defeat in Ireland, and above all for having returned to England against the Queen's explicit orders in 1599 – attempted a coup d'état that failed, after which Essex and some of his supporters were executed. The story has a special relevance to the history of English literature because, days before the uprising, some of these supporters had gone to the Globe theatre to ask for a new

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988) 65.

<sup>37</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 183.

performance of *Richard II*, a play about the deposition and murder of a king. The actors apparently did not find the proposal interesting, since the play no longer had any novelty value, but an offer of more money was enough for the performance to take place on the eve of the coup. After the arrest of Essex's employees, some members of the company were questioned, but no one was arrested. But one person is on record as having fully understood what had been at stake in the performance of this "old" play. Greenblatt narrates the episode as follows:

Six months after Essex's execution, Queen Elizabeth gave a gracious audience to William Lambarde, whom she had recently appointed Keeper of the Rolls and Records in the Tower of London. The learned archivist began dutifully going through an inventory of the records, reign by reign, that he had prepared for the queen. When he reached the reign of Richard II, Elizabeth suddenly declared, "I am Richard II; know ye not that?" If her tone betrayed a touch of exasperation, it may be because the antiquarian seemed to have his nose so exclusively in the past, while she, like everyone else, was reflecting on the dark parallels between the events in the fourteenth century and Essex's attempted coup. Thinking on his feet, Lambarde quickly grasped that the key point lay in "imagining" the ruler's death. "Such a wicked imagination," he told the queen, "was determined and attempted by a most unkind Gentleman, the most adorned creature that ever your Majesty made." "This tragedy," Elizabeth responded hyperbolically, "was played forty times in open streets and houses." It is the theater – Shakespeare's theater – that offered the key to understanding the crisis of the present.<sup>38</sup>

In this quotation, with its reference to the antiquarian with his nose firmly in the past, Greenblatt parodies and puts some distance between himself and the historicists – the antiquarians – whom he helped to create, while at the same time writing a small allegory of his own presentism, of his potential impact in the present, by using Shakespeare as a *key* at a time of crisis; but Greenblatt lacks a Henry VIII, a Stalin, or an Elizabeth I capable of understanding that there is a lock, a key and something hidden inside the safe. He hides his movements unnecessarily, writing as if he lived under an imaginary tyrant. For Greenblatt, who contributed to the culture of transparency that perversely culminated in this cynicism of an uninhibited power, concealment comes too late and there are no

<sup>38</sup> Greenblatt, *Tyrant* 22.

more things that one cannot say.<sup>39</sup> No tragedies need to be written to say the thing that cannot be said, and one does not need to show mirrors of previous magistrates to current ones as an oblique strategy. Greenblatt thus fashions a tyrant of his own, creating him in criticism under the guise of imitation, and recreating himself, in imitation of More and Kott, as a self-censoring truth-teller or moral guide, but in a time when all truth can be told, only for it not to make any difference. Writing about Trump in the US does not get you hanged, drawn and quartered. Greenblatt's brand of subversion continues in the Elizabethan past, not in the present.

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<sup>39</sup> By connecting a contemporary culture of transparency to the cynicism of an uninhibited power I am referring to the typical gesture of the extreme-right-wing populist who represents himself as a realist, telling the honest but distasteful truth and dispensing with niceties, thus showing a taste for dirt and for piercing decorum.

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