On Biography
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Persona Pratica e Persona Poetica[1]

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> A certain awkwardness marks the use of borrowed thoughts; but as soon as we have learned what to do with them they become our own.
> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakspeare; or, The Poet"

1. Biography

> Although almost every year there appears some new *Life of Shakespeare*, it is now time to recognise with resignation and clearly to declare that it is not possible to write a biography of Shakespeare. At the most, an arid and faulty biographical chronicle can be composed, rather as proof of the devotion of posterity, longing to possess even a shadow of that biography, than as genuinely satisfying a desire for knowledge. […] A rapacious hand is stretched out to seize the poetical works themselves, with the view of writing this sort of fiction since […] it cannot be admitted that it is impossible to know by deducing them from his writings, the life, the adventures, and the person of a man that has left about forty plays and poems. (Croce, pp. 122, 126)

> Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare[2]. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 208)

> […] since there has come down to us no writer more ancient than Hom-

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[1] This is the Italian original of Benedetto Croce's pregnant title of the first chapter of his study on Shakespeare. The English translation of this section is "The Practical Personality and the Poetical Personality", in Benedetto Croce, *Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille* [1920], Engl. transl. by Douglas Ainslie, New York, Henry Holt & Company, 1920, rpt. New York, Russell & Russell, 1966, pp. 117-37. This translation is quoted henceforward as 'Croce', followed by page number.

[2] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Shakspeare; or, the Poet", in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, *Centenary Edition*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson, Boston-New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1903-4, 12 vols, vol. IV *Representative Men. Seven Lectures* [1850], pp. 189-219. Quoted henceforward as 'Emerson, "Shakspeare"', followed by page number. The text may also be found online at: http://www.emersoncentral.com/shak.htm.

> er, […] we are obliged […] to discover the truth, both as to his age and as to his fatherland, from Homer himself[3]. (Vico, § 788, p. 305)

Shakespeare's biography an impossibility. Only a "Shakspeare" could write it. The hand stretched out to seize the poetical works themselves in order to deduce from them the life and adventures of the man, destined to bring back nothing but a handful of dust. The truth about Homer's life to be discovered from Homer himself, that is from his works.

What goes into the idea that a life (a bio-graphy: from the Greek $\beta\iota o\varsigma + \gamma\rho\alpha\phi\iota\alpha$) can, or perhaps should, be written independently from the works it has produced? What – on the other hand – goes into the idea that a life *is* its works?

Croce's conviction that the two histories, the practical and the poetical, are radically divergent, supports his argument about the impossibility of writing a biography of Shakespeare other than as an arid and faulty biographical chronicle of a few external facts. Is Croce here deliberately sharpening the opposition he himself has created in order to reinforce his argument? I don't think so. What he wants is to open the widest possible chasm between his own philosophy of art and nineteenth-century philology.

> […] the silent and tenacious, though erroneous conviction, as to the unity and identity of the two histories, the practical and the poetical, or at least the obscurity as to their true relation, is the hidden source of the large and to a vast extent useless labours, which form the great body of Shakespearean philology. This in common with the philology of the nineteenth century in general, is unconsciously dominated by romantic ideas of mystical and naturalistic unity, whence it is not by accident that Emerson is found among the precursors of hybrid biographical aesthetic […]. (Croce, p. 121)

Two points should be noted here. First, the mentioning of a "biographical aesthetic". A concept, however hybrid, open to a far more complex critical appreciation of the life/works relationship than that of biography interpreted as mere biographical chronicle. Second, the use of such words as "obscurity", "unconsciously", "hybrid", all still redolent of the nineteenth century's revision of neo-classical culture.

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[3] *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* [1744], ed. and Engl. transl. by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1968, rpt. 1994. Quoted henceforward as 'Vico', followed by paragraph and page numbers.

> Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. […] Shakespeare with his excellencies has likewise his faults […]. He had no regard to distinction of time or place […]. The effusions of passion […] are for the most part striking and energetic; but whenever he solicits his invention, or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumor, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity[4].

> The defect of such critical explanations lies in continuing to conceive of the artistic processes as something mechanical, and the unrecognised but understood presumption of some sort of "imitation of nature". […] Neither Shakespeare nor any other artist can ever attempt to reproduce external nature or history turned into external reality (since they do not exist in a concrete form) […] all he can do is to try to produce and recognise his own sentiment and to give it form. (Croce, p. 201)

> We can observe the re-immersion of Shakespearean poetry in psychological materiality […]. (Croce, p. 134)

The image of the mirror appealed to by Johnson on his setting out to extenuate Shakespeare's supposed "faults" was no less material, as a critical tool, than the "materiality" Croce now ascribes to Emerson's treatment of Shakespearean poetry. It is just a case of two 'materialities', different both in degree and in kind. But the taint of psychological materiality adheres as well to Croce's refashioning the time-honoured image of the "faithful mirror" into that of the poet engaged in "recognising" his own sentiment.

> Poetry, then, should certainly be interpreted historically, but by that history which is intrinsically its own, and not by a history that is foreign to it and with which its only connection is that prevailing between a man and what he disregards, puts away from him and rejects, be-

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[4] Samuel Johnson, "Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare", in *The Major Works*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 421, 427-28.

> cause it either injures him or is of no use, or, which comes to the same thing, because he has already made sufficient use of it[5]. (Croce, p. 137)

Clearly, the Shakespeare scholar active in Croce leads a separate life from the Vico scholar also living in him. Vico's *New Science* had been *new* exactly in this: in the undaunted courage with which it had faced, and tried to clarify, what Croce now called "the obscurity" of the relation between the two histories, the practical and the poetical. Vico too had started from the 'biographical' question – of course his text had been Homer, not Shakespeare – but in a completely different perspective: nothing, in him, of that 'faithfulness' to nature in which, according to his great quasi-contemporary, Dr Johnson, Shakespeare's major merit resided. For Vico Homer himself was nature, that is history. The result of Vico's investigations was, admittedly, abstruse: but hadn't Croce devoted a whole book to *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*?[6] Surely a groundbreaking book, at a time when the Neapolitan philosopher was all but ignored in Italy.

2. *Nation*

> […] the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. (Vico, § 34, p. 21)

In this principle is to be found the master key to Vico's *The New Science*, as he calls his ambitious treatise conceived, in the wake of Hobbes, as "a study of man in the whole society of the human race" (§ 179, p. 70). Culmination and motor of this *magnum opus* is its third book, provocatively titled "Discovery of the True Homer". In it, not only is the Greek poet established as the most ancient of writers, but the consequences of this fact are demonstrated to be decisive in settling the issue of the "true" Homer.

> This discovery […] has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life. (Vico, § 34, p. 22)

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[5] I have slightly altered the translation of the first part of this paragraph.

[6] Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* [1911], Engl. transl. by R. G. Collingwood, London, Howard Latimer, 1913.

From the very first Vico acknowledges the huge amount of intellectual energy spent in his effort to recapture the poetic infancy of the world. In retrospect, his own personal biography is seen as a fragment, however minuscule, of the world's history.

> […] since there has come down to us no writer more ancient than Homer, […] and since the writers came long after him, we are obliged to apply our metaphysical criticism, treating him as founder of a nation, as he has been held to be of Greece, and to discover the truth, both as to his age and as to his fatherland, from Homer himself. (Vico, § 788, p. 305)

Of course Vico is not unaware that – according to strict chronological order – there have been other poets before Homer, among them Orpheus, Linus, Musaeus, perhaps Hesiod. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, he warns his reader that what he is saying does not apply to "the Homer hitherto believed in" (§ 901, p. 327), but only to the one newly discovered by him, whose superior claim to antiquity does not rest on chronology but on poetry. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the veritable storehouse of all Poetic Wisdom, and this fact establishes Homer as both the "founder of a nation" and the only trustworthy authority about himself. It should be noted that Vico's original for "founder (of a nation)" is 'author'. Homer is "un autore di nazione" ('an author of nation'). Given the context, 'author' is more pregnant than 'founder' because – sharing, as it does, the semantic field of the Latin verb *augeo* – it brings into play the concept of augmentation, or increase, and therefore of birth. The idea of 'birth' is thus found to be as much at the root of 'Nation', as it is of poetry. 'Nation' is from the Latin *nasci*, 'to be born'. As a deponent verb, *nasci* is passive in form and active in meaning.

> A "nation" is etymologically a "birth", or a "being born", and hence a race, a kin or kind having a common origin or, more loosely, a common language and other institutions[7].

> We shall show clearly and distinctly how the founders of gentile humanity […] in a certain sense created themselves […]. (Vico, § 367, p. 112)

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[7] Max Harold Fisch, "Introduction", in *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. xx.

Both "nation" and "being born" imply the act of 'generation', or begetting, and therefore the fact of being "gentile". "Gentile" (the same in English as in Italian) is a particularly important word in Vico. It is the adjective of the Latin *gens* (a group of people sharing the same name and claiming descent from a common ancestor). A *nation* is identified *genetically*, by a system of institutions having as their fountainhead the simple fact of birth, and the act of being generated. The English language experiences the same conceptual oscillation in words like 'kind' (both in the sense of 'nature' and of 'gentle') and 'kin' (or 'family'). All these words are related to a common Indo-European root meaning 'giving birth', active also in the Greek *γενος* and the Latin *genus*. By definition authors give birth, and by this fact they become 'kind'. Human-kind. Being gentile, they are also noble and speak in poetic characters. Antiquity, authoriality (the fact of being an author), and nation, are thus put in a logical sequence. Taken together, they form a trinity in which each concept is alive in each one of the other two.

> As for the contest among Greek cities for the honor of claiming Homer as citizen, it came about because almost all of them observed in his poems words and phrases and bits of dialect that belonged to their own vernaculars.
>
> […] the reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer.
>
> […] the reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer really lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece […]. (Vico, §§ 790, 875, 876, pp. 305, 324)

The connecting element between 'antiquity' and 'nation' is 'language'. A 'written' language, though at the time only a spoken one. Written *because* spoken. "Our Homer" has been living on the lips, and is written in the memories, of the peoples who spoke him and, by so doing, became "Greece".

For the moment, the fact that, in a literal sense, no writing existed at the time of Homer does not make any difference. Vico develops his argument this side of the question of orality vs. writing, which will present itself much later.

> Barbarous peoples, cut off from all the other nations of the world, as were the Germans and the American Indians, have been found to preserve in verses the beginning of their history. (Vico, § 841, p. 317)

> All that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology[8]. (Emerson, "The Poet", p. 11)

To be a nation – no matter if "barbarous" or civilized – means to share a common birth, and therefore a common antiquity and a common poetic language. But the case of Homer is different from all others. He is and is not Greek. The fiction (if it is such) of him as a historical individual sits him on the cusp of time and place. When he was born Greece did not exist, and he invented it by creating himself as its *author*. His "practical personality" faced a world without Greece at a time when the Greek peoples were putting on his poetical personality – that is his works – and thus creating the nation of Greece. At that point, all the Greek peoples *were* Homer, because they *spoke* Homer, that is to say his poetry. Vico's "metaphysical criticism" disrupts the neat arrangement of sequential time: in order to discover the "true" Homer the common experience of time is of no help. The figure of historical time is seen to be not that of the arrow but that of the shuttle, restlessly moving backwards and forwards. The starting point of the investigation into the "true" Homer is also its final result: the truth about Homer – this is the gist of Vico's "*discoverta*" – cannot be derived but from Homer himself.

3. *Representative man*

> Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare; and even he can tell nothing, except to the Shakspeare in us […]. Read the antique documents extricated, analyzed and compared by the assiduous Dyce and Collier, and now read one of these skyey sentences, – aerolites, – which seem to have fallen out of heaven, and which not your experience but the man within the breast has accepted as words of fate, and tell me if

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[8] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet", in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition*, vol. III *Essays: Second Series* [1844], pp. 1-42. Henceforward quoted as 'Emerson, "The Poet"', followed by page number. The text is also available online at: http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/poet.html.

> they match; if the former account in any manner for the latter; or which gives the most historical insight into the man. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 208)

> For our existing world, the bases on which all the grand old poems were built have become vacuums – and even those of many comparatively modern ones are broken and half-gone. For us to-day, not their own intrinsic value, vast as that is, backs and maintains those poems – but a mountain-high growth of associations, the layers of successive ages […] upheld by their cumulus-entrenchment in scholarship, and as precious, always welcome, unspeakably valuable reminiscences[9].

Emerson's statement about Shakespeare being the only biographer of Shakespeare appears now less baffling than at the beginning. No less than Homer's, Shakespeare's words have been living on the lips and in the memories of the peoples who for centuries have been speaking his language, and this is why the man within the breast gives the most *historical* insight into the words of the man Shakespeare. "Historical" is keyword here, because it is the layers of successive ages and associations that have built the chronology through which the Poet is read. Just as the Greek peoples read themselves in Homer, in the same way have the British peoples been reading themselves in Shakespeare through the layers of successive ages.

> Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. […] A man is the whole encyclopaedia of facts. […] This human mind wrote history, and this must read it. […] All that Shakspeare says of the king, yonder slip of a boy that reads in the corner feels to be true of himself[10].

Emerson is here verifying on Shakespeare Vico's axiom that "the true is what is made". He might have heard about Michelet's French translations of *The New Science* in its entirety (1827 and 1834), and almost certainly had come across Henry Nelson Coleridge's translation (1834) of its third book, "On the Discovery of the True Homer", originally meant as an aid for the study of Greek at school and college. Or maybe he never heard about Vico. What I want to stress is that for him, as for Vico before him, the biography of the poet as "an author of nation" is the matrix in which the myth of the nation and, consequently, of its "birth"[11], is cast.

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[9] Walt Whitman, "A Thought on Shakspere", in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan, New York, The Library of America, 1982, p. 1151.

[10] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History", in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition*, vol. II *Essays: First Series* [1841], pp. 1-41; pp. 3-4, 6. The text is also available online at: http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2944/2944-h/2944-h.htm#link2H_4_0001.

> At the time when he left Stratford and went up to London, a great body of stage-plays of all dates and writers existed in manuscript and were in turn produced on the boards. […] Shakspeare, in common with his comrades, esteemed the mass of old plays waste stock, in which any experiment could be freely tried. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", pp. 192-93)

In his anxiety to appropriate the major glory of the Mother Country to the new Nation, Emerson discovers the true Shakespeare, just as Vico before him had discovered the true Homer. And like Vico's Homer, also Emerson's Shakespeare is not the one "hitherto believed in", but a Shakespeare all of his own creation.

> The poet [Shakespeare] of whose works I have undertaken the revision may now begin to assume the dignity of an ancient […]. Perhaps it would not be easy to find any author except Homer who invented so much as Shakespeare, who so much advanced the studies which he cultivated, or effused such novelty upon his age or country. The form, the characters, the language, and the shows of the English drama are his[12].
>
> For whilst to th' shame of slow-endeavouring art,
> Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
> Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
> Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
> Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
> Dost make us marble with too much conceiving […][13].
>
> The greatest genius is the most indebted man. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 189)

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[11] David W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (David W. Griffith Corp., 1915).

[12] Johnson, pp. 420, 440.

[13] John Milton, "An Epitaph on the Admirable Dramatic Poet, William Shakespeare", in *The Complete Oxford Shakespeare*, general eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987, rpt. 1994, 3 vols, vol. I, p. xli, ll. 9-14.

Vico founded Homer's immense authority on his being the most ancient of writers. Dr Johnson pays homage to the same tenet of literary genealogy by implying a relation between the richness and novelty of Shakespeare's invention, and his being "an ancient", or nearly one. This means that Johnson's Shakespeare looks further than Milton's. His Delphic lines still impress our hearts, but no longer make marble of them. On the contrary, they are a vivifying element, an active force in the nation's drama: in its language and characters. But the energy of Johnson's peroration is lost to Emerson's ears, keen on detecting, in Shakespeare's poetic measures, a different kind of 'invention' and a different kind of 'antiquity'. An all-American Shakespeare cannot eschew Homer, but has to find his own way to the ancient poet. Being the most ancient of poets had established Vico's Homer as the founder of the nation of Greece. But the new American Shakespeare – no less a founder than Homer – has no title to that type of antiquity. What he has instead, is the "waste stock" of the "mass of old plays" on which to experiment freely. A heap of ruins to refashion at will. The notion itself of "Homer's antiquity" is part of this waste stock to be reshaped and remodelled, if the time-honoured invention of the 'parallel lives' – Homer's and Shakespeare's – is to be kept alive and fruitful.

> […] I have been in such a state of Mind as to read over my Lines and hate them. […] yet when, Tom who meets with some of Pope's Homer in Plutarch's Lives reads some of those to me they seem like Mice to mine[14].

Doubts as to the Homer revisited on English ground in the previous century had been expressed by young Keats. But also of no use, to the Harvard-educated American scholar and divine, was the Victorian Homer, feasted upon, archaized and domesticized by the devotee of the Grecian Urn.

> I long to feast on *old* Homer as we have upon Shakespeare, and as I have lately upon Milton. If you understood Greek, and would read me passages, now and then, explaining their meaning, 'twould be, from its mistiness, perhaps a greater luxury than reading the thing one's self[15].

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[14] John Keats, "To Benjamin Robert Haydon", 10-11 May 1817, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 28.

[15] Keats, "To John Hamilton Reynolds", 10 April 1818, in *Letters*, p. 136, my emphasis.

In no way could Homer's "mistiness" – supposing there is one – be perceived by Emerson as a luxury. On the contrary, the poet he is expecting will be clear-sighted enough to assess the new country's real worth by scrutinizing its minutest particulars.

> I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. […] We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer. (Emerson, "The Poet", p. 37)

To see Homer's gods in the materialism of the times: of this divine power Shakespeare had been the supreme incarnation in the old world and no less was expected of "Shakspeare", his American avatar. Seen from the distance of the New Continent, "Shakspeare"'s antiquity, though genetically derived from Homer's, belonged to an evolutionary line all of its own. In Darwinian terms, it represented a 'variation' on the old stock.

> Poetry, largely consider'd, is an evolution, sending out improved and ever-expanded types – in one sense, the past, even the best of it, necessarily giving place, and dying out[16].

As an improved and expanded type of poetry, Shakespeare's antiquity is, if possible, even more radical than Homer's. It brings to light the inherent antiquity of the present moment. Of *all* present moments. Not only have America's incomparable materials been there since Creation, but they are still alive in the expectation of the tyrannous eye which will finally see in them yet another epiphany of Homer's gods. Immemorial past lives in the present moment.

> Now, literature, philosophy and thought are Shakspearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 204)

Perhaps it was through the fine instrument of Keats's verse that the voice of a "Shakspearized" Homer reached Emerson's ear. Keats heard that voice on his first reading Chapman's Homer. Perfectly contemporary with Shakespeare's, it guided him as far as Cortez's "eagle eyes"[17], eagerly staring at the newly discovered world. Perusing its immensity as unbounded allegory of future dominion. In the secluded, magic atmosphere of Concord, Massachusetts, the voice of *that* Homer, accompanying the fervour and cruelty of the Conquest, must have sounded uncannily "loud and bold"[18] to the ears of the American scholar. To die, in that voice, was – in Whitman's words – the past, "even the best of it". A past Homer, as well as a past Shakespeare.

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[16] Whitman, "A Thought on Shakspere", p. 1151.

> There is scarcely the slightest trace of any such feeling [love of posthumous fame] in his [Shakespeare's] writings, nor any appearance of anxiety for their fate, or of a desire to perfect them or make them worthy of that immortality to which they were destined. And this indifference may be accounted for by the very circumstance that he was almost entirely a man of genius […] he seemed scarcely to have an individual existence of his own, but to borrow that of others at will, and to pass successively 'through every variety of untried being', – to be now *Hamlet*, now *Othello*, now *Lear*, now *Falstaff*, now *Ariel*[19].

As "almost entirely" a man of genius – such is Hazlitt's argument – Shakespeare was indifferent to posthumous fame, let alone to his own individual existence. The Romantic critic is here looking to the Elizabethan playwright in the mundane, secular perspective born of the French Revolution. No longer seen as an effect of restrictions imposed by the necessity of covering an illustrious name, the 'blank' of Shakespeare's biography turns, under his pen, into an optical illusion. It reverberates from a mode of being which is not far from that of the professional impersonator – today's celebrity – who looks at himself through the refracting prisms of the characters he himself creates, and whose existences he dons and doffs with the nonchalance of the consummate actor. Seen under this light, factual void metamorphoses into visionary fullness. It is not a question of "deducing" the life and adventures of the man from his writings

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[17] John Keats, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", in *Poetical Works*, London-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 38, l. 21.

[18] Keats, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", l. 8.

[19] William Hazlitt, "On Posthumous Fame. Whether Shakespeare was influenced by a Love of it", in *The Round Table and Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* [1817], London, Dent; New York, Dutton & Company, 1944, p. 23.

(see Croce, above), but of seeing "the about forty plays and poems" (Croce, again) as themselves the life, and adventures, of the man.

> The characteristic of Chaucer is intensity; of Spenser, remoteness; of Milton, elevation; of Shakespeare, every thing. […] Shakespeare's genius was its virtually including the genius of all the great men of his age, and not his differing from them in one accidental particular. […] He was just like any other man, but that he was like all other men. […] He had 'a mind reflecting ages past', and present: – all the people that ever lived are there. […] He had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it. By an art like that of the ventriloquist, he throws his imagination out of himself, and makes every word appear to proceed from the mouth of the person in whose name it is given[20].

This is Romantic hagiography at its most exalted. The mask of the Shakespeare "hitherto believed in" – Johnson's Shakespeare, say – was hardly recognizable, under this hype. On the old Continent, it rapidly translated into the genealogy of Shakespeare-as-curator of the English national character.

> […] Voltaire was wrong to say that the French had improved on the works of antiquity; they have only nationalized them, and in this transformation they treated everything foreign and distinctive with infinite disgust […]. This is why the French have been the least able to come to terms with Shakespeare […]. Shakespeare understood how to imprint an English national character on the most variegated materials, although, far more deeply than the Spaniards, he could preserve in its essential basic traits the historical character of foreign nations, e.g. the Romans[21].
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> What would be the use of poets, if they only repeated the record of the historian? the poets must go further, and give us if possible something higher and better. All the characters of Sophocles bear something of that great poet's lofty soul; and it is the same with the characters of Shakespeare. This is as it ought to be. Nay, Shakespeare goes further,

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[20] William Hazlitt, "On Shakespeare and Milton", in *Lectures on the English Poets* [1818] *and The Spirit of the Age* [1825], London, Dent; New York, Dutton & Company, 1967, pp. 46-50.

[21] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Engl. transl. by T. M. Knox, Oxford, Clarendon, 1975, 2 vols, vol. I, pp. 267, 274-75.

> and makes his Romans Englishmen; and there too he is right; for otherwise his nation would not have understood him[22].

In a Europe where the idea of the national state was an established political and juridical principle, the image of Shakespeare as fashioner of national identity was bound to receive ample currency. Shakespeare was not a nationalizer – like the French, who put wigs on the heroes of antiquity and thought they had improved on them – but a real "founder of nation". Gifted with an extraordinary capacity for seeing the present in the past and the past in the present, he appropriated the basic traits of antiquity to the nation he understood as no other did. Dialectically, he was able to descry the Romans in the Englishmen, and the Englishmen in the Romans. And his nation understood him – understood him through the medium of his borrowed individual existences.

> Antonio, who occasionally liked to introduce polemical ideas into the conversation although he rarely led it, asserted that the basic principles of English criticism and enthusiasm should be sought in Smith's *On National Wealth*. They were only too glad when they could carry another classic to their public treasure. Just as every book on that island became an essay after it had lain the proper time, in the same manner every writer became a classic. For the same reason and in the same way, they were just as proud of making the best scissors as of making the best poetry. Such an Englishman reads his Shakespeare no differently than he does Pope, Dryden, or whoever else might be a classic; he does no more thinking while reading one than the other[23].

> Finally, we must note a relation between a general characteristic of the English spirit and the nature of Shakespeare's poetry, although it is incapable of being exactly defined or grounded. Empiricism and the bent for induction corresponding to it developed in England with the same consistency which this nation displayed in the development of

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[22] Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, Engl. transl. by John Oxenford, ed. J. K. Moorhead, London, Dent; New York, Dutton, 1970, p. 198 (18 April 1827).

[23] Friedrich Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poetry" [1799-1800], in *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, Engl. transl., introduction and notes by Ernst Behler and Roman Struc, University Park-London, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968, p. 58.

> its constitution. Ever since Bacon's time, Plato and Aristotle have had no authoritative influence whatever on English attitudes and inclinations. Both the simple observer and the methodical scientist show an incomparable and refreshing impartiality in their perceptions and in the study of the natural and social realities surrounding them. Other modes of thought may have prevailed among philosophers and theologians, and may even have influenced the intellectual life of wider circles; during Shakespeare's time it was, after all, precisely Platonism that exerted the greatest influence; but these tendencies did not alter the empirical bent of the English spirit[24].

The English national character was perceived, on the Continent, as a composite, pluri-mediated formation – an original medley of high culture and everyday life. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the formula of "the empirical bent of the English spirit" is firmly established. It has finally impressed its seal both on the *idée reçue* of the national character and on the official interpretation of the national constitution. It accounts for the pursuit of wealth as well as of high culture. Shakespeare not excepted.

> Nay, apart from spiritualities; and considering him [Shakespeare] merely as a real, marketable, tangibly-useful possession. England, before long, this Island of ours, will hold but a small fraction of the English: in America, in New Holland, east and west to the very Antipodes, there will be a Saxondom covering great spaces of the Globe. And now, what is it that can keep all these together into virtually one Nation […]? Acts of Parliament, administrative prime ministers cannot. America is parted from us as far as Parliament could part it. […] Here, I say, is an English King, whom no time or chance, Parliament or combination of Parliaments, can dethrone! This King Shakspeare, does not he shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying-signs; indestructible; really more valuable in that point of view than any other means or appliance whatsoever? We can fancy him as radiant aloft over all the Nations of Englishmen, a thousand years hence. From Paramatta, from New York, wheresoever, under what sort of Parish-Constable soever, English men and women are, they will say to one another: "Yes, this Shakspeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and

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[24] Wilhelm Dilthey, "Goethe and the Poetic Imagination" [1877; 1910, 3rd edition], in *Selected Works*, eds Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985-, 6 vols, vol. V *Poetry and Experience*, p. 263.

> kind with him". The most common-sense politician, too, if he pleases, may think of that[25].

From being accompaniment to the empirical bent of the national character, the name "Shakspeare" has rapidly become instrumental to it. At home, the fiction of the Bard as divine ventriloquist has evolved into the prodigious marketable commodity – present on a global scale – we inherit today. And it was there, at that juncture of times, that Romantic biography became relevant in a yet untried way. True, very little was known about Shakespeare the man; but very much could be known about the place he had come to occupy in the hearts of the people. Put side by side, the two orders of facts cross-fertilized.

> Well: this is our poor Warwickshire Peasant, who rose to be Manager of a Playhouse, so that he could live without begging; whom the Earl of Southampton cast some kind glances on; […] consider what this Shakspeare has actually become among us. Which Englishman we ever made, in this land of ours, which million of Englishmen, would we not give up rather than the Stratford Peasant? […] Consider now, if they asked us, Will you give up your Indian Empire or your Shakspeare, you English; never have had any Indian Empire, or never have had any Shakspeare? Really it were a grave question. Official persons would answer doubtless in official language; but we, for our part too, should not we be forced to answer: Indian Empire, or no Indian Empire; we cannot do without Shakspeare! Indian Empire will go, at any rate, some day; but this Shakspeare does not go, he lasts forever with us; we cannot give up our Shakspeare![26]

Already, in Carlyle's Hero-worship, the story of the poor Warwickshire Peasant is extremely enjoyable; filmic, almost. But Emerson – his protégé from beyond the Atlantic – would go much, much further than that.

> There is somewhat touching in the madness with which the passing age mischooses the object on which all candles shine and all eyes are turned; the care with which it registers every trifle touching Queen Elizabeth and King James, and the Essexes, Leicesters, Burleighs and

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[25] Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Poet. Dante; Shakspeare", in *On Heroes and Hero Worship* [1841], London, Dent; New York, Dutton, 1959, pp. 345-46.

[26] Carlyle, p. 344.

> Buckinghams; and lets pass without a single valuable note the founder of another dynasty, which alone will cause the Tudor dynasty to be remembered, – the man who carries the Saxon race in him by the inspiration which feeds him, and on whose thoughts the foremost people of the world are now for some ages to be nourished, and minds to receive this and not another bias. […] Bacon, who took the inventory of the human understanding for his times, never mentioned his name. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 202)

Are we not here deliciously remote from the psychological materiality and biographical aridity Croce at a later date would spot in any foreseeable Shakespearean biography? Also very enjoyable is the silent snub at the so-called "Baconian hypothesis", on which Croce will pour fastidious scholarly scorn.

> We may also save ourselves from wonder and invective of the "Baconian hypothesis", by means of this indifference of the poetical work towards biography. […] But even if we grant the unlikely contention that in the not very great brain of the philosopher Bacon, there lodged the brain of a very great poet, from which proceeded the Shakespearean drama, nothing would thereby have been discovered or proved, save a singular marvel, a joke, a monstrosity of nature. (Croce, pp. 131-132)

By 1920 – the year Croce's chapter on Shakespeare goes to press – the writing of 'biography' was at the core of modernist experimentation. But the Italian philosopher prefers to stick to his cherished notion of the "indifference of the poetical work towards biography", which is after all a way – *his* way – of tackling a delicate literary issue.

> In the present volume, […] the author applies herself to the demonstration and development of a system of philosophy, which has presented itself to her as underlying the superficial and ostensible text of Shakespeare's plays. […] They filled out the scientific scheme which Bacon had planned […][27].

> I doubt it not – then more, far more;
> In each old song bequeath'd – in every noble page or text,
> (Different – something unreck'd before – some unsuspected author,)
> In every object, mountain, tree, and star – in every birth and life,

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[27] Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Preface", in Delia Bacon, *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspere Unfolded*, London, Groombridge & Sons, 1857, pp. viii-ix.

> As part of each – evolv'd from each – meaning, behind the ostent,
> A mystic cipher waits infolded[28].

"Shakspere-Bacon's Cipher" – such is the title of Whitman's poem – was an elegant disclaimer, at the end of the century, of the Baconian hypothesis Croce will too facilely get rid of. At mid-century, Hawthorne had maintained a much more guarded attitude towards his female compatriot, whose work threatened "to tear out of the Anglo-Saxon heart the name which for ages it has held dearest"[29], substituting it with other improbable names. But it was also a reprise – Whitman's poem was – of the Emersonian discourse on poetry and dominion. On the surface, Emerson had been only extending Carlyle's words, in order to bolster up what might look, on his part, a naïvely optimistic vision about America. Examined in depth though, his project was the far more ambitious one of predicating national identity on a poet still to come, but whose precursor had already appeared on this earth under the name of "Shakspeare". As if responding to this ambition, Whitman's "cipher", forty years later, is still both "mystic" and "infolded". Both spiritually significant and as yet unexplained.

> The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth. (Emerson, "The Poet", p. 5)

A new order of dominion is announced in these words. Charged with the electricity of long expectation, the commonwealth would receive *that*, and not another, bias. It will receive it as a present from his own American "Shakspeare" or "Shakspere", in embryo already the "inventor of the human" we today receive from Harold Bloom.

> Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations,

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[28] Walt Whitman, "Shakspere-Bacon's Cipher", in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 643. Whitman's poem was originally published in *The Cosmopolitan*, 4 (October 1887).

[29] Hawthorne, p. xv.

> the wrath of rogues […], the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination […]. (Emerson, "The Poet", pp. 37-38)

On the new, virgin soil, mythical forces are still in control of men's lives: hence the messianic expectation of the American poem, which will rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, the mother of all myths. The still-to-come American Shakespeare founds his claim to antiquity on his power to be Homer's contemporary. No less than Gloucester's in *King Lear*, Emerson's is, imaginatively, a jump in the void. It lands him on one of criticism's blank spaces. An undiscovered country opens before his eyes.

> The entrepreneurial pioneers owned the land and also identified with it. […] This "primordial wilderness" was also "vacant": when the European settlers saw themselves as quickening a virgin land, the modern spirit completed its genesis by becoming flesh in the body of the American continent[30].

The American scholar anxiously waiting for his "Shakspeare" has the same blank, before his eyes, as the entrepreneurial pioneers quickening a virgin land. Not yet sifted to the dregs, America's splendid materials have not yet revealed their design, and the consequent blurring of the vision affects the pioneer and the philosopher alike, though in different ways. The task of the first is to conciliate material possession of the soil with idealist self-definition of one's own value. The even more daunting task of the second is to create, out of America's ample geography, a format pliable enough to accommodate the new Shakespeare.

> All the debts which such a man [Shakspeare] could contract to other wit would never disturb his consciousness of originality; for the ministrations of books and of other minds are a whiff of smoke to that most private reality with which he has conversed. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 199)

> Almost all cities of Greece claimed to be his [Homer's] birthplace, and there were not lacking those who asserted that he was an Italian Greek. (Vico, § 788, pp. 304-5)

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[30] Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 4.

> We all know how much *mythus* there is in the Shakspere's question as it stands today[31].

> […] when we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical. (Emerson, "The Poet", p. 38)

> He [Shakspeare] knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it. Such is the happy position of Homer perhaps. (Emerson, "Shakspeare", p. 197)

It is by a series of imperceptible proprietary acts that The New World takes possession of the Old, and it is extraordinary the way this goal is achieved under the sign of Vico's Homer. The American scholar is busy shaping the Canon to his own likeness: Milton is too literary, and Homer can be too literal as well as too historical. But then he finds in Shakespeare the perfect connoisseur of the true stone, who will succeed in putting America's incomparable materials in that high place which is their due.

> Criticism is infested with a cant of materialism, which assumes that manual skill and activity is the first merit of all men, and disparages such as say and do not […]. Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words. (Emerson, "The Poet", pp. 7-8)

By taking centre stage, the new Continent's ample geography has dissolved the cant of Romantic materialism, which enveloped the parallel fictions of the divine ventriloquist, of the man who is all men, of the superman throwing his imagination out of himself like a malevolent, or benign, wizard. It was the destined task of America's "splendid materials" to dissolve those mists of the intelligence.

> But Homer's words are as costly and admirable to Homer, as Agamemnon's victories are to Agamemnon. (Emerson, "The Poet", p. 7)

And the same is true of "Shakspeare"'s words: each one of them a victory snatched from the hardness and costliness of the visible world. Each one of them as hard and sharp and sparkling as a warrior's sword. And acting like one. Is it too much, at this point, to remind the reader that Dante's Homer holds a sword in his hand (*Inferno*, IV, 86)? Emerson's Shakspeare is the American Homer, the American Dante. He is, most evidently, "Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon"[32].

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[31] Walt Whitman, "What Lurks behind Shakspere's Historical Plays?", in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, p. 1148.

> The summary of my suggestion would be, therefore, that while the more the rich and tangled jungle of the Shaksperean area is travers'd and studied, and the more baffled and mix'd, as so far appears, becomes the exploring student (who at last surmises everything, and remains certain of nothing,) it is possible a future age of criticism, diving deeper, mapping the land and lines freer, completer than hitherto, may discover in the plays named the scientific (Baconian?) inauguration of modern Democracy […] may penetrate to that hard-pan, far down and back of the ostent of today, on which (and on which only) the progressism of the last two centuries has built this Democracy which now holds secure lodgment over the whole civilized world[33].

It is perfectly understandable that, being so inextricably entwined with the myth of Discovery, the name of Shakespeare should come up the moment the new Democracy became aware of its own still intact potentialities, and wanted its own syncopated "Shakspeares" or "Shaksperes" to be different, in degree if not in kind, from the stable, relaxed "Shakespeare" of the Mother Country. The new nation is proud of this difference: proud, even, that two lives so different and far apart the one from the other as those of William Shakespeare and George Fox may be, share a common ground exactly in that *indifference* of words and actions which Emerson had famously stressed with reference to Homer's words and Agamemnon's victories. But Whitman flies lower, and higher, at the same time, than his compatriot.

> Only to think of it – that age! its events, persons – Shakspere just dead, (his folios publish'd, complete) – Charles 1st, the shadowy spirit and the solid block! […] Strange as it may sound, Shakspere and George Fox, (think of them! compare them!) were born and bred of similar

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[32] Harold Bloom, "Walt Whitman as Center of the American Canon", in *The Western Canon*, New York, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994; London, Macmillan, 1995, pp. 264-90.

[33] Whitman, "What Lurks behind Shakspere's Historical Plays?", p. 1150.

> stock, in much the same surroundings and station in life – from the same England – and at a similar period. One to radiate all of art's, all literature's splendor – a splendor so dazzling that he himself is almost lost in it – […] the other […] What is poor plain George Fox compared to William Shakspere – to fancy's lord, imagination's heir? Yet George Fox stands for something too […][34].

That George Fox stood for something was also Coleridge's impression, as early as 1832.

> To estimate a man like Vico, or any great man who has made discoveries and committed errors, you ought to say to yourself – "He did so and so in the year 1720, a Papist, at Naples. Now, what would he not have done if he had lived now, and could have availed himself of all our vast acquisitions in physical science?"
>
> After the *Scienza Nuova*, read Spinosa, *De Monarchia, ex rationis praescripto.* They differed – Vico in thinking that society tended to monarchy; Spinosa in thinking it tended to democracy. Now, Spinosa's ideal democracy was realised by a contemporary – not in a nation, for that is impossible, but in a sect – I mean by George Fox and his Quakers[35].

By way of conclusion, I like to take up this hint from Coleridge's *Table Talk*, collected and edited by his nephew Henry Nelson, who, two years on, would publish his translation of Vico's chapter on the "Discovery of the True Homer". There is reason to believe that during those two years Vico's name came up quite frequently at Coleridge's table. It seems to me that in the words of the great Samuel – uncontestedly the supreme authority on the theme of biography and poetry – many, if not all, of the different, and at times divergent, strands we have been following in these pages may find a convergence and perhaps an anticipation too. If for no better reason, at least for his mentioning Vico as one of the great men who made discoveries (and committed errors). When Vico spoke of "monarchy" what he had in his mind was an idealized image of the Roman Empire, interpreted as the most sustained attempt, in the ancient world, to extend the empire of reason to the largest possible number of people. An ideal of democracy was therefore on Vico's horizon, as it was on the horizon of George Fox, whose life Whitman chose to see in parallel with Shakespeare's. But here I risk repeating myself. Suffice it to say that there are more things in a practical personality, as opposed to a poetical one, than even a Benedetto Croce could dream of. Or was his sharp distinction between the two a subtle defense mechanism against the too radical myth of the absoluteness of the artist's activity – *life* and *works* – as it presented itself in the ebullient years (the 1920s) of postwar modernism?

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[34] Walt Whitman, "George Fox (and Shakspere)", in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, pp. 1244, 1247-48.

[35] *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, preface by Henry Nelson Coleridge, London, John Murray, 1851, p. 171 (23 April, 1832).