

Shakespeare against Biography

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1. Biography

At the beginning of Antonia S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale* (2000) the young Phineas G. Nanson confesses to his Head of Department and Anglo-Saxon specialist, Ormerod Goode, that he doesn't want to be "a post-modern literary theorist" because he feels "an urgent need for a life full of *things*"¹. His expression of the desire for "things" elicits the following response from Goode: "*Verbum caro factum est* [...]. The art of biography is a despised art because it is an art of things, of facts, of arranged facts". The young Phineas spends the remainder of the novel engaged in just such an arrangement, although he is finally forced to admit that "[i]t was of course, *my mind*, the mind of Phineas G. Nanson, that was doing all the work of redesign and recombination. It wasn't nice"².

At the beginning Phineas Nanson has clearly read his *Macbeth*, but by the end of the novel he has also read his Jakobson, his Barthes and possibly, even, his Foucault. Both the process of selection, and his immersion in a world of disjointed "facts" expose the extent to which a "weight of meaning" is built "around the categories of the world"³. But it is also as though the novel has built upon Virginia Woolf's observation that, "raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he [the biographer] sees his sub-

¹ Antonia S. Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2000, pp. 3-4.

² Byatt, p. 201.

³ John Frow, *Genre*, The New Critical Idiom, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2015 (2nd edition), p. 19.

ject spread about him. He chooses; he synthesises; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist"⁴. She goes on to say that the biographer – in this instance Harold Nicholson – “has devised a method of writing about people *and himself* as though they were at once real and imaginary"⁵. This is, of course, Woolf’s own method in her fictional biography of Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* (1928), when the documentary evidence fails:

Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination⁶.

The persistent presence of the fictional biographer, his/her omniscient appeal to ‘facts’, and to techniques of narration, expose, as Rachel Bowlby has observed, “how both history and biography imply particular conceptions of the relations between subjectivity and history – what ‘makes’ the man (or woman) or period that is represented as a discreet and describable entity”⁷.

It is not difficult to recognise the standard method of Shakespearean biography in these observations. This is also substantially what Hermione Lee, a biographer of Woolf, adopts as a method, in which “selection” and “shaping” and “pointing up the artifice of biographical narrative” allowed her to be “inspired” by Woolf’s own “experimental novelistic strategies for accessing the interior lives of her characters and dealing with time, memory, and perspective”⁸. Lee goes on to observe that Shakespeare’s biographers “differ widely – or wildly – in their lines of approach, between

⁴ Virginia Woolf, “The New Biography”, in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, London, The Hogarth Press, 1967, vol. IV, p. 231.

⁵ Woolf, “The New Biography”, p. 232.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Brenda Lyons, introduction and notes by Sandra M. Gilbert, London, Penguin, 1993, p. 84.

⁷ Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1988, p. 129.

⁸ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 122.

romantic guesswork, dogged sleuthing, historical contextualising, post-modern indeterminacy"⁹. This may be so, but at the end of the day they are all united in their search for the individual, the 'man' Shakespeare, the stable 'subject', who is socially determined, but who transcends these historical and cultural limits, and whose authority lies behind and above the 'texts' that are attributed to him and that are instrumental and expressive of a 'personality'. The *oeuvre* becomes the means whereby Shakespeare's "inner life realises itself" as Hegel might say¹⁰, but also as *telos*, a harbinger of a 'modern' or even 'post-modern', future. But as Katrine Keuneman observes, in her preface to the English edition of Roland Barthes's *Criticism and Truth*: "The writer is the person for whom language is problematical, not transparent, who lays emphasis on the depths and not the instrumentality of language"¹¹. This impinges directly upon the 'subjectivity' of the writer, and upon the conception of Shakespeare as a representative figure whose writing is driven by a teleological imperative.

The challenge that this poses, and that Barthes develops in his essay on "The Death of the Author", is that it rejects the existence of the writer's position as something that is prior to language that is assumed to embody a verisimilitude and that is an instrumental gateway to a singular authorial meaning. It is also to acknowledge that the 'author' is what Foucault would identify and reject: "a privileged moment of individualisation in the history of ideas, knowledge and literature", involving "reference to an originating subject or to a language conceived as plenitude which supports the activities of commentary and interpretation"¹².

To displace 'Shakespeare' from the practice of identifying unitary meaning is to challenge the notion of an autonomous subjectivity, and to distinguish the 'life' from the question of the 'author', while at the same time rendering the teleological narra-

⁹ Lee, p. 136.

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Engl. transl. by John Sibree, New York, Dover, 1956, p. 462.

¹¹ Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, "Preface", in Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, Engl. transl. by Katrine Pilcher Keuneman, London, The Athlone Press, 1987, p. 21.

¹² Cf. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?", in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Engl. transl. by Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca-New York, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 115, and p. 123, note 19.

tives that flow from this conjuncture of what are, in effect, two distinct discourses, irreducibly inter-discursive¹³. Indeed, at a purely empirical level, what little we know of Shakespeare, even in his last years, flies directly in the face of a teleological or a developmental narrative. It is also to challenge what Barthes calls a “critical verisimilitude”¹⁴ that is “very fond of evident ‘truths’”, which are considered as being “essentially normative”¹⁵. One of the “rules” of verisimilitude that Barthes identifies is one that is central to biographical discourse: “objectivity” based upon “the certainties of language”, and its implications “of psychological coherence and the imperatives of the structure of the genre”¹⁶. The “evident truths” that emerge according to Barthes are “only choices” that, he goes on to say, “are *already* interpretations, for they imply a pre-existing choice of psychological or structural model; [...] all the objectivity of the critic will depend then, not on the choice of code, but on the rigour with which he applies the model he has chosen to the work in question”¹⁷. But what applies to fictional ‘character’ applies equally to biographical ‘character’ insofar as critical verisimilitude asserts that “life itself is clear: the same banality governs the relationship of people in books and in the world”¹⁸. In a later section on “The science of literature” he identifies what he calls “a literature faculty” which is “an energy of discourse” that

has nothing to do with ‘genius’, for it is made up not of inspiration or personal will-power but of rules built up by many people besides the author. It is not images, ideas or lines of verse which the mythical voice of the Muse breathes into the writer, it is the great logic of symbols and great empty forms which allow him to speak and to operate¹⁹.

¹³ Cf. Foucault, p.124, where Foucault seeks to reverse the logic whereby “the function of the author is to characterise the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within society”.

¹⁴ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 34.

¹⁵ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, pp. 36ff.

¹⁷ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 39.

¹⁸ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, p. 75.

Barthes's killing off of the 'author' as "transcendental signified"²⁰ presents a very real challenge to the foundations of biographical discourse. It leads, as Séan Burke ultimately concludes, to the view that in a reconstruction of the figure of the author as "human subject" only one tenet can be stated with certainty "to wit, that authorship is the *principle of specificity in the world of texts*". Moreover, far from "consolidating the notion of a universal or unitary subject, the re-tracing of the work to its author is a working-back to historical, cultural and political embeddedness"²¹, where both sides of the equation exist in a dynamic interaction with each other. In the decades since Barthes, Shakespeare biography has operated comfortably with the parameters of a teleologically imbued 'authorship' that Burke's careful revisionism has proposed, but it has done so without challenging the principles of 'fact', psychological consistency, or indeed, a "theology of the idealist subject"²² that have underpinned its generic foundations. Indeed, we might even go so far as to suggest that the biography of the figure of the 'author' conflates two distinct discourses: one which is historically specific²³, and 'biography' per se with a particular series of assumptions concerning 'subjectivity'²⁴.

2. *Fact, factish, faction, fiction*

Prologues and epilogues are interesting generic forms. They allow writers moments for candour, and if, as in the case of Stephen Greenblatt's "Epilogue" in *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), they have been rendered self-consciously problematical, that is clearly not the case in Samuel Schoenbaum's "Epilogue" to his monumental *Shakespeare's Lives* (1991). In the introduction to *Derrida: A Biography* (2013), Benoît Peeters reveals that he has "sought, in the final analysis, to write not so much a Derridean biography as

²⁰ Cf. Séan Burke, *The Death and Return of The Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998 (2nd edition), pp. 23ff.

²¹ Burke, p. 202.

²² Burke, p. 113. I borrow this phrase from Burke who is using it in a different context.

²³ See Foucault, pp. 124-25.

²⁴ I owe the clarification of this point to my colleague at Stirling, Dr Dale Townshend.

a biography of Derrida”, and he sketches in the former as “a multiple, layered but not hierarchised, *fractal* biography which would escape the totalising and teleological commitments which inhabit the genre from the start”²⁵. In some ways, *Shakespeare’s Lives* can be described as a “fractal biography” insofar as it explores a multiple series of “lives”, although it does not flinch from its stated objective which is to pursue the quest “for knowledge of Shakespeare the man”²⁶. After some 568 pages Schoenbaum concludes that the twentieth century “yet lacks an authoritative Life conceived in the modern spirit”. He laments the absence of “a single personal letter, one page of diary!” but insists that “[e]ach generation must re-interpret the documentary record by its own lights and endeavour to sort out the relations of the man and the masks in the plays and sonnets”. The absence of documentary evidence stands in the way of biographical positivist method to unearth salient ‘facts’, but this is now regarded as being of secondary importance to a more enduring record: “*Whatever we conclude in this regard*”, Schoenbaum asserts, “we may discern in the *oeuvre* as a whole, the mysterious workings of a poet and dramatist’s imagination; we can follow *the development of mind and art*, which, in the final resort, matter more to us than Shakespeare’s private sorrows and ecstasies”²⁷. Despite his genuflections in the direction of a modish pluralism, that by 1991 had infiltrated even the most conservative of literary discourses, Schoenbaum is on the side of a progressive ‘realism’ as opposed to ‘constructivism’; if the documentary record refuses to yield meaning, then the *oeuvre* will. Schoenbaum has done more than any Shakespeare scholar to unearth and document ‘the facts’ but he retains a naïve faith in the spontaneous philosophy that attention to the *oeuvre* will surpass the practical, but, one suspects, over-determined vicissitudes of ‘interpretation’.

This fetishising of the Shakespearean *oeuvre* takes place as though there were a quite natural and unproblematic pathway from ‘fact’ to text. Insofar as Schoenbaum can acknowledge a relativist and constructivist bent in relation to the assembly of biographical ‘facts’ he does so, but moving from unrecorded “private sorrows and ecstasies”

²⁵ Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, Engl. transl. by Andrew Brown, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, p. 6.

²⁶ Samuel Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1991, p. vii.

²⁷ Schoenbaum, p. 568, my italics.

to the quasi-factual solidity of the *oeuvre* is to suggest, in the words of Bruno Latour, “that construction and reality are synonyms”²⁸. The late Terence Hawkes, writing a year after the appearance of Schoenbaum’s book, put the matter a little more directly in his comment that “[a]t one time” *Hamlet* “must obviously have been an interesting play written by a promising Elizabethan playwright” but since then it has “taken on a huge and complex symbolising function, and as part of the institution called ‘English Literature’”²⁹. Here the symbolic function of language to which Barthes had referred some twenty-five years earlier is extended well beyond the parameters he originally envisioned. But Hawkes is even more direct in his refusal to equate ‘facts’ or indeed ‘texts’ with the unproblematic assertion that they represent a prior ‘reality’:

Facts do not speak for themselves. Nor do texts. This doesn’t mean that facts or texts don’t exist. It does mean that all of them are capable of genuinely contradictory meanings, none of which has any independent ‘given’, undeniable, or self-evident status. Indeed, they don’t speak at all unless and until they are inserted into and perceived as part of specific discourses which impose their own shaping requirements and agendas³⁰.

By extension this also includes the figure of the ‘author’, to whom we may attribute ‘agency’ but who does not precede language, who is constituted *in* language, and for whom reality is *experienced* substantially through language³¹.

Thus, to constitute and reconstitute the ‘facts’ involving the name Shakespeare is, *a fortiori*, to create fictions. And it is no accident that recent years have spawned a number of novels that deal directly either with aspects of Shakespeare’s ‘life’ or with the problems of the discourse of biography itself. Indeed, we might even say that the problems have extended into the realm of autobiography, as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, or Derrida’s essay “The Ear of the Other”

²⁸ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 24.

²⁹ Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare*, London-New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 4.

³⁰ Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present*, London-New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 3.

³¹ Cf. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Engl. transl. by Richard Howard, New York, Hill & Wang, 2010, p. 56.

testify. Rudolph Gasché observes in his response to Derrida's essay that autobiography "is not in any way to be confused with the so-called life of the author, with the corpus of empirical accidents making up the life of an empirically real person". And he continues:

Rather, the biographical, insofar as it is autobiographical, cuts across both of the fields in question: the body of the work and the body of the real subject. The biographical is thus that internal border of work and life, a border on which texts are engendered³².

In the essay itself Derrida reiterates the now post-structuralist commonplace that the effects, or structure of a text, are not reducible to its "truth", "to the intended meaning of its presumed author, or even its unique and identifiable signatory"³³. This is a very long way from William Empson's, admittedly nuanced, claim that when critics "make or imply a judgement about an author's character, they should supply evidence from his biography"³⁴. In the examples that Empson chooses: Marvell, Fielding, Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce, there is ample documentary evidence to warrant a shuttling between writer and text, but in the case of Shakespeare much requires to be inferred, and the inferences are by no means consistent in pointing towards an omniscient authority. Shakespeare's texts are what Barthes would call "writable" texts insofar as they do not encourage the spectator or the reader to consume them; rather the spectator and/or the reader is invited to engage productively with the text³⁵. Indeed, Barthes distinguishes between what he calls a "text of pleasure [...] that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it" and that "is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading" and

the text that discomfords (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions,

³² Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, Engl. transl. by Peggy Kamuf, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1985, p. 41.

³³ Derrida, p. 29.

³⁴ William Empson, *Using Biography*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1984, p. 42.

³⁵ Cf. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Engl. transl. by Richard Miller, New York, Hill & Wang, 1974, but also Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977, pp. 45ff.

the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language³⁶.

In 1919 Virginia Woolf could assert in a quasi-Sidneyan fashion that “[t]he novelist is free” to invent his or her characters while “the biographer is tied”³⁷, and she went on to insist that “[w]e can no longer maintain that life consists in actions only or in works. It consists in personality”³⁸. *Orlando*, of course, transcends that limitation in that it allows ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ to jostle with, and interrogate, each other. But it also testifies to the claim made by her contemporary, Georg Lukács, who perceived a deep formal connection between what he calls “the inner form of the novel” and “biographical form”. “The novel”, he argues,

overcomes its ‘bad’ infinity by recourse to the biographical form. On the one hand the scope of the world is limited by the scope of the hero’s possible experiences and its mass organised by the orientation of his development towards finding the meaning of life in self-recognition; on the other hand, the discreetly heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolised by the story of his life³⁹.

For Lukács “the novel tells of the adventure of interiority”⁴⁰, precisely the ground on which biography and fiction meet, and where the biographer is implicated in “a method of writing” that Virginia Woolf recognised as being partially solipsistic: “writing about people *and about himself* as though they were at once real and imaginary”⁴¹. This is precisely the mode of critical discourse that we associate with A. C. Bradley for whom Shakespeare’s ‘characters’ are possessed of a reality that exceeds their roles in the plays in which they appear. It follows from this that Shakespeare, like his characters, has a ‘public’

³⁶ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Engl. transl. by Richard Miller, New York, Hill & Wang, 1975, p. 14.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography”, in *Collected Essays*, vol. IV, p. 221.

³⁸ Woolf, “The Art of Biography”, p. 230.

³⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, Engl. transl. by Ann Bostock, London, Merlin Press, 1971, p. 81.

⁴⁰ Lukács, p. 89.

⁴¹ Woolf, “The New Biography”, p. 232.

and a 'private' life, with all that that entails. Except that these terms have historically specific meanings that link biography, fiction, and a universal theory of 'humanity'. In a much larger context, Jürgen Habermas has described this as

a public consisting of private persons whose autonomy based on ownership of private property wanted to see itself represented as such in the sphere of the bourgeois family and actualised inside the person as love, freedom, cultivation – in a word as humanity⁴².

Once we acknowledge the convergence of novelistic and biographical discourse, then we are forced to reconsider the range of historical meanings to which terms such as 'public' and 'private' may be susceptible. This also embraces the different meanings to which the concept of 'otherness', embedded in Barthes's and Derrida's accounts of the relation between autobiography and biography, are susceptible. It is indeed the case, as Stephen Greenblatt has observed, that in seeking to speak with the dead, "to hear the voice of the other", one is inevitably forced to hear one's own voice⁴³. The problem is, as Jorge Luis Borges observes in his short story "Shakespeare's Memory", that what he possesses is "my own personal memory and the memory of that Shakespeare that I partially am. Or rather, two memories possess me"⁴⁴. It is that "personal memory", replete with projections, condensations, evasions, ideological underpinnings, that Terence Hawkes's "presentism" aims to re-instate as an indispensable and radically destabilising force that exposes the constitutive difference that resides at the heart of all historical enquiry.

3. *The fictions continue*

The melange of 'fact' and 'fiction' that comprises biographical narratives, and that in turn is what biography depends upon, is dedicated

⁴² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Engl. transl. by Thomas Burger, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1991, p. 55.

⁴³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Berkley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "Shakespeare's Memory", in *Collected Fictions*, Engl. transl. by Andrew Hurley, New York, Penguin, 1998, p. 510.

to revealing Shakespeare ‘the man’ and continues to guarantee its expansion because there is a gulf between assembled documentary evidence and the fictional texts. While the cultural authority of Shakespeare continues to expand, the ‘author’ recedes into the background. Fictions purporting to uncover *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare* (2012)⁴⁵ jostle with biographies that announce themselves as disclosures of a private life. New connections between unrelated and partially documented aspects of the ‘life’ generate new speculations. To take one recent, extreme, example: René Weis’s exhaustively earnest *Shakespeare Revealed: A Biography* (2007) manages to excavate a Shakespeare who was a grain-hoarding homosexual cripple, and a French-speaking serial philanderer, who had managed to contract venereal disease that he succeeded in turning into poetry. Utilising a time-honoured biographical practice of oscillating opportunistically between sparse documentation and selections from the Shakespeare *oeuvre*, Weis embarks on the following speculation that, despite an initial conditional “if”, seeks to link the “life” with *The Merchant of Venice* and the sonnets:

If the fiction of the play is matched to the story of the life that emerges from the *Sonnets*, for Antonio read Shakespeare, with Bassanio is [sic] a version of the earl of Southampton, who quite possibly told Shakespeare about his relationship with Essex’s cousin Elizabeth Vernon sometime during the summer of 1598⁴⁶.

This is what Franco Moretti, in his book *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (2013), would label a “filler”, a narrative that offers “pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life”, offering the kind of fanciful linkage that is “to story-telling what comforts are to physical pleasure: enjoyment pared down, adapted to the daily activity of reading a novel”⁴⁷. Set alongside a short passage from Jude Morgan’s recent novel, recording Shakespeare’s first meeting with Anne Hathaway, both genuflect in the direction of Shakespeare’s texts but both add a very contemporary ‘creative’ gloss; in Morgan’s narrative the young Will is watch-

⁴⁵ Jude Morgan, *The Secret Life of William Shakespeare*, London, Headline Review, 2012.

⁴⁶ René Weis, *Shakespeare Revealed: A Biography*, London, John Murray, 2007, p. 236.

⁴⁷ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, London-New York, Verso, 2013, p. 81.

ing a performance of *The Right Tragical History of Darius King of Persia* in the Guildhall in Stratford when he sees Anne:

But for the first time Will's attention was split. He kept watching Anne's face, almost as if it were part of the play. Judging the tragedy by the lights and shades it drew on that face. It seemed to him that other faces were like blank leaves compared to hers, where a whole busy page of text invited the eye to read⁴⁸.

This lacks the eloquence of Romeo's

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows
As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.
(*Romeo and Juliet*, I.v.46-48⁴⁹)

But it is surely the 'text' that Morgan has in mind as he transports his Elizabethan lover into the ethos of the modern teenager. I leave aside the 'fact' that the first performance of *Darius King of Persia* was in 1688.

Biographies of Shakespeare are full of these fictional elements, and similarly, fictional lives of Shakespeare seek to amalgamate 'fact', 'faction' and 'fiction'. The aim seems to be to stabilise a persistently elusive 'authority' that the available documentation fragments. We can, of course, seek some solace in the experimental biographies/ autobiographies of writers such as Barthes or Derrida that privilege incoherence and that resist teleological imperatives. But such is the force of Shakespeare's global image that the impulse to construct a coherent identity, capable of generating those "archetypal myths of tradition" from within the description of a particular historical individual⁵⁰, has proved difficult to resist.

The issue becomes more serious, however, when a literary critic of some distinction slips into the biographical mode as a means of assisting textual exegesis, ostensibly in the manner advocated by Empson.

⁴⁸ Morgan, p. 48.

⁴⁹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

⁵⁰ I have borrowed part of the phraseology from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 287.

Much is made of the name 'Shakespeare' on the title-page of the 1609 Quarto of the *Sonnets*, to the extent that Katherine Duncan-Jones is convinced that it was Shakespeare himself who authorised their publication⁵¹. It is into this theoretical context in which the name 'Shakespeare' is invested with transparent meaning⁵², that I want to locate *Sonnet 122*, a sonnet that traditionally comes within the group that is thought to be directed towards a male addressee. Duncan-Jones is very cautious in providing a naturalistic autobiographical narrative context for the poem⁵³, and this accords with John Kerrigan's initial description of the occasion of the poem. However, Kerrigan proceeds to question this narrative by asking why Shakespeare "should have chosen to write on a theme which, however conventional, challenged, indeed contradicted, his deepest instincts about memory and mortality". He then pinpoints a further difficulty in that "so accustomed is the reader at this stage to associate writing and anxiety about writing with the poet that the script discussed keeps shifting, in reading, from the friend to the apologetic *I*". He concludes that "[i]t is not finally possible, however, to read the text as an apology for losing *tables* inscribed by the poet – *tables* given him, blank, by the friend", and he lays the blame for the sonnet's confusion on the claim that "Shakespeare found himself tackling a theme which he could not handle with assurance (because the idea of writing carried such weight); biography impinges, once more, through inelegance of argument"⁵⁴. I leave aside the question of how Kerrigan manages to locate Shakespeare's "deepest instincts" or whether they are the instincts of the critic projected onto the object of his enquiry. What he does register, however, is a nervousness about reading biographical detail into a poem that is self-evidently *about* the practice of writing. Equally, he appears nervous

⁵¹ Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Introduction", in William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Thomson Publishing, 1997, pp. 34-36.

⁵² Derrida, p. 9, where in a discussion of Nietzsche's "name" in *Ecce Homo* Derrida notes that life "will return to the name but not to the living, in the name of the living as a name of the dead".

⁵³ Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 354: "The speaker has parted with a notebook or manuscript volume given him by his friend, but claims that his own memory provides a more lasting memento".

⁵⁴ John Kerrigan, "Commentary", in William Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan, London, Penguin, 1999, p. 343.

about moving away from a referential model of textual meaning that privileges consumption of the text's contents, and into one in which the reader is invited to collaborate with the speaker in *producing* the text. Both commentators display some discomfort at the prospect of straying from the mimetic gestures that the text appears to display.

Helen Vendler in *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997) moves a step further in fabricating what she calls "an absent centre" for the poem that takes the form of a hypothetical question from "the young man" which is: "Why did you give away my gift to you?"⁵⁵. From this she constructs a nuanced dialogue, which prompts a range of "shifts by the speaker from strategy to strategy" that represent "Shakespeare's way of mimicking social unease, an unease prompted by the unanswerability (in factual terms) of 'Why did you give away my gift?'"⁵⁶. This entire mimetic scenario treats the language of the poem as being primarily referential: an actual conversation took place that involved a 'real' book, and Shakespeare himself experienced a degree of "social unease" at having performed a particular action. All this is part of a narrative that is assumed to be fundamentally biographical, and that attempts to 'authenticate' the occasion of the publication of the *Sonnets* underpin. The entire argument from hypothetical biography falls if for a moment we entertain the distinct possibility that the addressee of the poem might equally be female, or that the alleged object might be metaphorical and not literal. If we privilege in our reading, as Kerrigan hints that we might, an uncertainty that seeps into "the categories of the world" to which the poem appears to refer, then the "gift" and the "tables"⁵⁷ to which the first line refers might just as easily register an act of inscription: the "tables", i.e. the distilled wisdom (that includes the appearance) of the addressee, comprise the "gift" itself. These are the qualities that are inscribed permanently ("charactered") in the speaker's "brain" "with lasting memory". The "idle rank" of line 3 permits a distinction to be made between the alleged permanence of writing, and the actual permanence of detail that resides in the living memory. The second quatrain qualifies the exaggeration with which

⁵⁵ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 518.

⁵⁶ Vendler, p. 519.

⁵⁷ All quotations are from Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.

the first quatrain concluded. Memory, it is argued, is dependent upon 'life', and so long as the addressee continues to live then there will be a living "record" of these qualities. This sets up an opposition between the living "record" and an inferred impermanence of an actual written record. This would reverse the Latin adage *verba volant scripta manent*. Except, of course, that in this case, the *scripta* is nothing less than the sonnet itself. Or, to put it another way, the speaker is inviting the reader to engage with an act that performs a conflict between two modes of 'writing', that of literal inscription versus one that invokes the *presence* of the addressee. Simply to assert as 'real' the speaker's hypothetical experience of carelessness and subsequent embarrassment at having given away an actual object is to miss what is at stake here, and especially in the case of a sonnet that begins nominally as a paean of praise to the addressee. Indeed, by the end of the third quatrain, the speaker can dispense with the written record of his love: "Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score" (l. 10), and is prepared to rely on a more direct strategy that is present to itself: "To trust those tables that receive thee more" (l. 12), where "those tables" are the items that are inscribed in the speaker's living memory. Thus far the poem appears to be complimenting the addressee and reaffirming the speaker's "love". At no stage in this argument are we enjoined to think that this is a male or a female addressee, even though such "love" as is expressed appears to be spiritual rather than physical. The final couplet, however, returns us to the ethos of 'writing':

To keep an adjunct to remember thee
Were to import forgetfulness in me. (ll. 13-14)

The sheer audacity of this concluding couplet lies in the question it poses about the actual status of the sonnet. The paradox that the first 12 lines seek to negotiate is one involving two radically opposed modes of inscription. The 'absence' that Vendler attributes to a specifically unvocalised question reduces to a 'realistic' scenario the distinction between vocalisation per se, that privileges the voice, and 'writing' that defers *presence*. Thus the inscription of the sonnet itself, according to this logic, performs an act of forgetfulness. I need hardly point out that what I have offered is a *reading*, and one that resists reduction to some autobiographical 'fact' that might

limit its meaning. Indeed, I offer it as an example of a 'writable' text that systematically blocks any attempt to 'consume' its meaning, and that therefore resists a 'biographical' reading. Or, as the late D. F. McKenzie would have it, "[i]f a poem is only what its individual readers make it in their activity of constructing meaning from it, then a good poem will be one which most compels its own destruction in the service of its readers' new constructions"⁵⁸.

Biography is a problem for us because in its customary form it discloses an ideological investment in unitary meaning, while at the same time, and especially in the case of Shakespeare, entangling the 'authority' ascribed to the author with that assumed by the critic. The claim is that the closer we read the texts, the closer we get to the 'author' Shakespeare and the closer we get to a re-affirmation of a hierarchy of discourses. However, if Barthes's attempt to kill off the author was designed to initiate the development of democratic reading, he may well have underestimated, if not oversimplified, the capacity of the 'authority' that this threatened to displace, to migrate, and to set up shop elsewhere. Perhaps we should celebrate the fact that insufficient evidence survives to produce a 'definitive' Shakespeare biography of the sort that Schoenbaum dreamed of.

⁵⁸ D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 26. A little earlier in his essay, McKenzie signals his desire to acknowledge "authorial meaning" that he thinks "is in some measure recoverable" while at the same time "for better or for worse, readers inevitably make their own meanings" (p. 19).