On Biography
ISSN 2283-8759
DOI 10.13133/2283-8759-2
pp. 147-160 (December 2015)

Shakespeare's Many Lives

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Literary biography is an art which can be practised with scrupulous fidelity or anachronistic imagination. And Shakespeare's life has been shaped in both these ways by his many biographers. In his own sublime manner, Henry James in his story "The Birthplace" imagines librarian Morris Gedge who, once installed as the custodian of "the sacred place, the early home of the Supreme Poet, The Mecca of the English-speaking race"[1], realizes how difficult it is for him to exercise his devotional role and at the same time remain faithful to the truth of his love for the Bard. Much to his surprise, reverence and sincerity do not get along. He profoundly reveres the art of the Writer whose shrine he keeps (the name Shakespeare is never pronounced), and precisely for that reason (you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain), he feels piously obliged to observe the mystery of his cult, but in doing so grows more and more suspicious and begins to doubt the chatter he feels forced to give tourists who visit the home. As he respectfully carries out his mission, he begins to understand that those who come so far to adore Him do not want the truth: they don't want to be told how things really were; they do not want to know the facts ascertained, they want to be helped to dream… Yes, dream… The pilgrims come in order to be helped to dream about Him, they come to be in His presence, to feel the spell, the mystic presence of the Writer, who is behind the Art they admire. The devout Gedge tries at first to be true to his love of truth, and divulges the scarce facts of which he is certain, which do not amount

[1] Henry James, "The Birthplace" [1903], in *Complete Stories, 1898-1910*, New York, The Library of America, 1996, pp. 441-95; p. 443.

to much; then he succumbs… He understands his position requires of him to come to terms with the needs of fiction, he *must* lie; and in the end he capitulates to the Show. He cannot profess an apophatic faith in front of the desperate need of the visitors to be told facts and anecdotes, however imaginary, about the sacred Body, the Corpus of the supreme Artist. He feels he *must* produce the Corpus of the Author for them to adore, he *must* feed their appetite for the real thing. They want not only to be administered the *host*, they want the real *body*; they want to see the exact place where He was born – because He *was* born, He was a man in the flesh – yes, He was a genius but also a common man. His life was of course exceptional, but after all not so very different from theirs.

So he takes them to the Holy of Holies of the Birthplace, the Sublime Chamber of Birth – empty as a shell, of course, which he fills up with stories he invents in order for them to feel the mystic presence, and they feel it! He feeds the gluttony of the public for false facts, for a fictional life which helps them to love his works. So the end, which is good, justifies the means, which is false, somehow.

After all, a little bit of fantasy helps and if that is what they want, he will give it to them. Do they want to know how as a child He played around the house? Do they want to 'humanize' the Artist, so that their relationship to Him becomes easier? Why not? He complies with their human, all too human desires, and of course, they love it, the number of tourists grows and he, the willing custodian, gets a raise.

In this way, though, Gedge's employment changes into an ordeal and not only does he find himself entrapped in the net of "the immense assumption of veracities and sanctities, of the general soundness of the legend"[2]; he finds himself split in two – between the priest of the idol and the poor unsuccessful honest man he had always been. He grows more and more estranged from Him, Whom he knows can only be adored in the poverty of true faith, in the absence of paraphernalia.

Masterfully, Henry James touches here on a crucial point of the question we Shakespeareans must face *vis-à-vis* our author and his work. Why do we, who have his works of art, want to know more about his life? More of the life of the artist, whose art we celebrate? Is the work of art not enough? Do we believe that if we know more of

[2] James, p. 459.

his life, we may get more of the sense of his art? Do we want to know more about the work of art, or more about the author? Are we admirers or envious? Do we delight in his being like us? Or do we hate his being different from us?

Is the passion fuelling the many biographies and the many films[3] dealing with the *life of Shakespeare* admiration or envy? I am not sure. It is certainly the case that of *Shakespeare's lives* there are so many now, and they are of two kinds: there are those where he is celebrated, those where he is denigrated, those in which he is attacked, others where his wife Anne is maligned…[4] Through the years we have had scholars saying that Shakespeare was a pen-name, a pseudonym, a fraud, an impostor. Shakespeare was not Shakespeare, Shakespeare was an 'other'.

A brilliant but troubled, self-appointed researcher – the American Delia Bacon – came all the way from the States to England to persuade us gullible Shakespeareans that the very idea that "a stupid illiterate third-rate play-actor" could have written works of such "superhuman genius" was pure madness[5]. In order to write what Shakespeare in fact wrote, according to her, he needed a set of qualities – good breeding, foreign travel, the best education, knowledge of court-etiquette, which she found – what a coincidence! – in Francis Bacon. She ended her life in an insane asylum.

Another determined to show that Shakespeare was the earl of Oxford and – what a coincidence! – the man was called Looney. *Nomen omen*, one might well say. The fact is that the allure of the absurd has beguiled the imagination ever since the world began, so much so that there are those who pretend to respect reality but in fact find it too anonymous, and tend to yield to an occult fanaticism, and to indulge in a taste for fanciful, fantastic reconstructions.

On the contrary, we should recognize that there are many and compelling reasons to maintain that we are absolutely right in believing that the man from Stratford did indeed 'write Shakespeare';

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[3] For this and the following see "Shakespeare: Playwright or *Sprachschöpfer*?", in *Memoria di Shakespeare*, 8 *On Authorship*, eds Rosy Colombo and Daniela Guardamagna (2012), pp. 95-118.

[4] On this see the very interesting essay by Maurice J. O'Sullivan, "Shakespeare's Other Lives", in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (1987), pp. 133-55.

[5] Bacon's essay is reprinted in Peter Rawlings, *Americans on Shakespeare, 1776-1914*, Aldershot, Asghgate, 1999, pp. 169-99 (quotations on p. 199 and p. 173).

and if there is something deplorable, it is indeed the appearance yet again, in the post-millennium, of biographies in which speculations about Shakespeare's inner life are made on the basis of his literary works by clever scholars who for the 'common' reasons of becoming 'popular' or 'making money' are ready to feed the appetite for conspiracy theories, which never seems to end; or are prone to connive with the desire of familiarity with the 'genius'.

In fact, those who reject or contest Shakespeare's authorship are far stranger than the provincial guy who came to London from Stratford in his twenties, grew wealthy and went back home in his late forties to buy himself a house and die. We have contemporary witnesses who testify to it. We have tracks left by printing houses and theatrical practice. We have a thousand details that show, apart from anything else, how unnecessary the whole farrago has been and is. We know for sure that Shakespeare was Shakespeare, both a simple and a mysterious man; a man of the theatre, who read, observed, listened and remembered. He was like himself, exactly like anybody else. We know of Shakespeare, we know of his age, we know of his readings, of him as an actor, of him as a playwright, of the historical and social background. The compact documentary life written by Samuel Schoenbaum, a masterpiece of the genre, covering four hundred years of Shakespearean scholarship, is there to be consulted[6]. But it is not enough, it does not exhaust the appetite for gossip… The Show must go on… as the patient Gedge would say.

In the nineteenth century a general disbelief seemed to prevail amongst readers and scholars, who dared to challenge the sacrosanct authenticity of Homer and the Gospels and Shakespeare himself – disbelief which, *à propos* of Shakespeare, conveyed to a wide audience the false idea that the scant facts of Shakespeare's life, largely derived from surviving financial records and legal proceedings, were too poor to demonstrate for sure that Shakespeare was Shakespeare, without making clear that it would have been more strange to see much else survive from the sixteenth century.

Things have changed, but in another sense the disbelief still persists: where could an ordinary man find the extraordinary capacity which enabled Shakespeare to write – in the mere three years from

[6] Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, revised edition with a new postscript, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

1595 to 1597 – *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*? And in the five years from 1600 to 1604 *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*? And then the year after: *King Lear* and *Macbeth*? He would finish one play, start another and these were – I repeat – *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. He had not been to university, he was not an intellectual, so how did he manage to pull it off? Clearly, it could not be him, it had to be someone else… an exceptional man, a miracle. A wonder-man. A superman.

The situation – albeit in a completely different context – had already been imagined by Shakespeare himself in the last act of his *Antony and Cleopatra*, when the Egyptian queen asks the astonished Dolabella: "Think you there was or might be such a man / As this I dreamt of?" That is, a man who even remotely resembles the one she has just described, as though in a dream. Yes, because now that Antony is no longer alive, it seems to Cleopatra that she has dreamed him up, and she would give anything – life, more than life! – to see such a man once more.

A man who was a world, who bestrode the world and dominated it; a magnificent and munificent man. "Do you think, Dolabella, that a man like this ever did or could exist?", Cleopatra insists, and Dolabella, almost in a whisper, almost ashamed, replies, "Gentle madam, no". He has never known such a man. Did or could a man like him exist? The force of Antony's personality is immense. Literally unbelievable.

This more or less is what happens with Shakespeare. At a certain point, people stopped believing that Shakespeare had existed. In the beginning there were people who had met him, and knew that Shakespeare was Shakespeare – people who had no doubts, like for example Heminges and Condell, two actor friends of his, who after his death took the trouble to collect his works into one volume. Nor did Ben Jonson – for whom Shakespeare was an admired colleague – have any doubts. In his view, Shakespeare was a good actor and writer – and a handsome man. Heminges and Condell and Ben Jonson knew where he lived – in temporary, rented accommodation.

Then there came those who had met people who had known him personally, like John Aubrey. He also did not doubt his existence. In his *Brief Lives* he reports that Shakespeare composed his works by taking his cue from real life. He had heard from someone who had known him that the character of the constable in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was someone he had chanced to meet at Grendon, on

the way from London to Stratford. That was Shakespeare's way; he drew out his characters from everyday life.

As the years passed by and the time of his actual historical existence receded into the past, the legend took over. In 1790, when Edmond Malone started to work on a new edition of Shakespeare's plays, wanting to order them chronologically, he thought that he could reconstruct the chronology on the basis of personal, biographical cross-references, which he sought out in the plays; as if a writer could write only about things he knew *because* he had experienced them. This is the original sin, which in the years to come was to clear the way towards a subjective, almost lyrical, confessional reading of Shakespeare's works. As though dramatic works might be subject to such a mood or tone…

This is the great error that in the early 1900s blinded Freud himself: in his view Shakespeare could only have written *Hamlet* after the death of his father and only because he had experienced the grief of losing his son Hamnet, a grief which would come back to the surface in the tragedy of the Danish prince. It is this kind of interpretation that justifies those who reason as follows: how could Shakespeare have known everything about the art of falconry, since he wasn't a nobleman? How could he have known everything about a ship if he had never sailed on one?

The fact is, as I said earlier, in the mid 1800s a strong general agnosticism prevailed, which was not limited to Shakespeare. In the previous century, some libertine authors had gone so far as to cast doubts even on the Gospels. Was it really believable that the authors of the Gospels were simple, ignorant, illiterate fishermen? Voltaire, for his part, had pointed out that the New Testament was full of contradictions and deceptions. And even the historical existence of Jesus: what proof was there of that? What if everything was a myth? The question was being asked with ever greater insistence.

The same question was asked ironically by the refined and learned writer Samuel Butler in translating the *Odyssey*: is it possible that the person who wrote the *Iliad also* wrote the *Odyssey*? Impossible, asserts Butler. Clearly the *Odyssey* was written by a woman, who knows how washing is spread out in the sun, how sheets are folded and how fabric is spun with a spindle. And indeed, Butler writes, the author was an authoress, a Sicilian princess from Trapani; while it was most certainly a man – who knows all about war – who wrote the *Iliad*.

To return to Shakespeare, at a certain point people no longer wished to believe in the testimony of those who had met him, the contemporaries who were witnesses to his existence. As I said, it was argued that the information we had was too little, though in actual fact, given the times in which he lived – not particularly meticulous when it came to conserving documents – it is already a miracle that any documentary proof of his existence survives.

So they started daydreaming about Shakespeare, which of course we may let people do, on the clear understanding, though, that if we really have to answer the question 'who was Shakespeare?' the only valid answer for a true reader and a loyal critic must be that Shakespeare is the name we give to a most magnificent *corpus* of works which go under that name. One needs the work, what else? Nothing else in fact can help us to get closer to a writer. As a critic I myself do not want anything else. As a critic I don't think we can make useful statements about Shakespeare in general. As a critic, I know that the writing 'I' is a transformation of the living 'I', but it's the writing 'I' that counts. Virginia Woolf explains the mystery very well[7]: the life of a writer is not a series of exploits, it is not a tale of battle and victory, it is more an inner life of emotions and thoughts which a writer expresses in what he/she writes… So we come back to the work. There is nothing else but the work… Yes, it may be that Shakespeare had a stormy life, from his writing we can tell "there is scarcely anything nasty and sordid which he hasn't lived through, not a passion which he hasn't known; hatred and love, revenge and lust, murder and fire – all these he seems to have experienced, as a poet"[8]. But precisely as a real poet should, ought to, he sacrifices his person to his poetry, so much so that all he has lived through is in his work. Or it doesn't count. I firmly believe in T. S. Eliot's *dictum* that the progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, "a continual extinction of personality"[9].

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[7] See Virginia Woolf's two essays on "The New Biography" [1927], in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. IV, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London, The Hogarth Press, 1994, pp. 473-80, and on "The Art of Biography" [1939], in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays*, ed. Rachel Bowlby, London, Penguin, 1993, pp. 144-51.

[8] That's Strindberg on Shakespeare, in his essay entitled "The Self-Sacrifice of the Writer", quoted by Inga-Stina Ewbank in her "The Tempest and After", *Shakespeare Survey*, 43 (1991), pp. 109-20.

[9] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" [1919], in *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1932; new edition New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950, p. 7.

Very much in the same vein as Morris Gedge, I as a reader feel that there is nowhere else to go "to catch the author"; "practically […] there is no author […] for us to deal with", except "in the work"[10] – as Gedge concludes, anticipating Foucault and Barthes.

I am a reader of Shakespeare whom Shakespeare has turned into a writer about Shakespeare precisely because of the fantastically rich way in which Shakespeare exploits the verbal resources of his language and culture. Precisely because I want Shakespeare to be 'simply' what he has written, I recognize Shakespeare as a function, the author-function. And when I read Shakespeare and when I write about his plays, I turn my back on the quagmire of biographical speculations which sound to me so boring. I prefer to attune my ears to other sounds.

Of course I recognize the powerful attraction which emanates from the miracle of his extraordinary output, and perfectly understand that one may want to consider how the forces of his personality and those of his society shape the ambiguities of the poetry. Still, in order to truly love him, I feel I have to abjure any reference to things outside the house of language. I want to predicate everything on words, I want to know Shakespeare from his words. Of course I know the greatest poetry is the most baffling; like Touchstone I am ready to profess that "the truest poetry is the most feigning"; I know of the depth of Jacobean negation inhabited alike by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Of course I believe in the existence of Shakespeare, of course I recognize the fact that Shakespeare was as an entity prior or exterior to those texts which go under his name: yes, not only an author, Shakespeare was an actor, and a man – there is hard evidence, proof of it. Shakespeare certainly had an investment in what we could define as an ideological dimension, he had beliefs, feelings, he suffered, he believed and disbelieved and of course I understand that we want to 'humanize' Shakespeare and our relation to him, and in order to do that we 'demythologize' Shakespeare. Nor do I want to reject familiarity in the name of an aesthetic sublime. Of course Shakespeare is in his plays, his life has spilled over into the lives of others; it is there, in the other lives, in the others' lives he creates, in the characters who live in his dramas, that he deposits his own.

[10] James, p. 472.

I do not want to deny, nor denounce the tendency to try and discover the 'man' behind Shakespeare's works. On the contrary, I understand it, it is part of our human, all too human nature, to want to pry into the affairs of others, to look too closely and curiously and impertinently into the lives of others – perhaps because we are dissatisfied with our own.

I only observe that all this is very problematic. First of all, what does the word 'life' mean? In Shakespeare's case, his existence between birth and death? What he did, what he thought, what happened to him in that arc of time? Of course, the interest is immense, but how to satisfy it?

We go back to the question: is there a proper writing of lives? Life-writing is certainly an art; in its essence a kind of conservative art, in that it intends to celebrate a life of the past. It is also a mania very peculiar to the British; more than other peoples, the British seem to believe in the individual life, without necessarily wanting to turn it into a cult of personality, although there is an inevitable tendency, it seems, to transform the protagonist of the life into a hero. Things get more difficult if one wants to write a non-fictional biography, a 'true' biography, if the biographer wants to rely only on real facts and events. Again Virginia Woolf, herself a writer of biographies, explains how impossible it is to write a biography without imagining… If the man Shakespeare himself is the supreme object of our curiosity, if we do want to get at the essence of his temperament, if we believe that the aim of biography is the truthful transmission of personality, then we need fiction. We need some little phrase or anecdote picked up in passing, we need to imagine the tone of his voice, how he turned his head, how he laughed… After all, biography is itself a model for our thinking about the nature of imaginative writing. Still, the distinction between the two genres remains absolutely central: they differ in the very stuff of which they are made. At the same time writing a biography is writing.

We might think that we get to know Shakespeare the man in conflating what Shakespeare's characters say and do and what their creator said and did. This foraging for autobiography may be popular, but it does violence to Shakespeare. It diminishes the very thing that makes him so exceptional, his imagination. As Keats and Eliot and Joyce understand perfectly – they know it! – Shakespeare is Shakespeare precisely because he has recoiled from the work. Shakespeare

writes in order not to express himself, but so that the lives of others may appear in all their variety, so that the work of art may appear in its freedom. The work of art is not the mirror of the author. In Shakespeare's case the very concepts of 'authority' and 'authorship', 'identity' and 'ownership' undergo a special metamorphosis, due to his absolute originality, but also to his medium and to his epoch.

Shakespeare is not the great artist working in splendid isolation. Yes, there is a moment in which he is alone before the page and no doubt that moment of mystery remains, but it is also true that that moment, the moment of writing in solitude, is immediately dispersed within the social sphere. So much so that I would prefer to say that it is the entire age, his audience – whose real presence is inscribed into the play and conditions it – that writes Shakespeare's plays.

While a paradox, the idea is important for it serves to elucidate something that has to do with the essence of the dramatic medium Shakespeare uses. Shakespeare has not left us any abstract theories about his art. His is a practice without theory – or better, he theorizes as he practices. That's the point. Shakespeare is both Bottom and Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and through them he passes on pearls of incomparable dramaturgical wisdom. In the mode of parody, it should be noted. Shakespeare is Polonius and Hamlet, and through them he tells us how things went in the contemporary theatre. The Danish prince even inscribes us into the play in the role of active spectators, and *Dramaturgen* at the same time.

In the dramatic spectacle the audience is part of the play, in the sense that the audience too is a playwright. The audience in the theatre is more active than in other media, and the playwright is reactive to the highest degree, ready to exploit the emotion, the commotion that unites the stage and arena. In this sense the name Shakespeare denotes a function and not an individual. After all, if the notion of 'author' is constructed from the text, it cannot be other than a form. Existence itself is of course form, that's where ethics and aesthetics embrace one another.

In the construction of the Shakespearean text various figures and functions come into play: the copyist, the editor, the spectator. The last figure is the reader as interpreter who cannot but be aware of both the physical and metaphysical fact of the present-day *corpus* composed thanks to an operation of philological engineering. The image of the *corps morcelé*, taken up by Lacan, serves to indicate this. Lacan refers it to a stage of human growth, a stage in the process of

identification, which is also a movement towards form. In any case the total form of the body is perceived due to a mirage, an image in the mirror which the infant child captures and assumes as his own thanks to the triangulation with the gaze of the mother. One point in this process interests us: the passage from a fragmented image of the body to an orthopaedic formation of its whole – a montage, in essence. This is what happened – as we have seen – to the Shakespearean text, which we must in a certain sense imagine in the beginning as a body without organs which through successive orthopaedic operations acquires the form we know.

This state of things renders complex both the hermeneutic act and the identification of the category founding the act itself, the category of 'author'. What does the word 'author' mean in these given conditions? Is the author the owner, the possessor? Texts, as Foucault points out in his 1969 essay titled "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?"[11], began to have authors at the moment in which the author could be punished, that is to say to the extent to which what the author said or wrote was shown to be an act, a gesture filled with danger. If this were the measure of authorship, one would have to note that in the case in question the theatrical text belonged not to Shakespeare but to the company, and that as far as censorship was concerned, had the text been penalised, the corporal or financial punishment would have been meted out to the entire company, to the theatre itself.

As Foucault points out, it is in the 1800s that, along with the question of ownership of a work, a personal idea is established of the author not as a function, but as an individual whose concealed face we wish to unveil, as if the work could and must coincide with the concrete and psychological individuality of the author. This is what we saw happen to Shakespeare in the nineteenth century too, when the train of doubts with regard to his historical person began.

The truth is that the figure or function of the author is a variable that changes over time and in history, so that our way of treating the relationship between the author and his work changes. Before the nineteenth century, the name of the author was fundamental, yes, but for scientific texts, as a guarantee of truth, while literary texts circulated for the most part anonymously. Afterwards, things changed – they were turned upside down in some ways.

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[11] In *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 63:3 (1969), pp. 73-104.

In the twentieth century, the issue of the relationship of the author to his work went to extremes, to the point of the absurd and paradoxical demonstration that the work does not belong to the person who wrote it, for in any case the meaning is not based on the intentionality of the author, but lives in the virtually infinite proliferation of readings that can be given of a text. With succinct simplicity in his 1968 essay Barthes announced *la mort de l'auteur*[12]: the author is dead, the reader is free to conduct the processes of signification of the text as he pleases, without regard for the signifiers.

The whole of twentieth-century literary theory led to this conclusion, problematizing the relationship between the speaking and writing subject, taken in relation to language in an insoluble suspension, a language that by definition goes infinitely beyond the speaking and writing subject in opening a word space that is neither of the author, nor of man, nor of God…

Is not literature, is not the theatre a language anterior to the writing subject? Does not the work in itself involve the sacrifice of the particular characters of the subject to the advantage of the neutral and anonymous ones of language – and in particular of theatrical, dramatic language?

Almost as if literature exculpates the writer, taking every responsibility away from him, identifying the writer as a passive site where a superior language is encountered, certain radical positions have come to the point of cancelling the linguistic act that ties the author to his work and which is at the origin of the author, defined as the juridical referent of the pronounced or written word. It is not by chance that Foucault's essay opens by echoing on the one hand the question of "who is speaking" – fundamental for philosophy – and on the other Beckett's answer, "What does it matter who is speaking?"

It is thus that the question of the author, a question that concerns man himself both as subject and author, falls by the wayside. Language, which nevertheless continues to be one of the privileged sites where knowledge is manifested, manifests itself as the very complex woven plot where the subject is emptied, or better where it encounters its own emptiness. If the author as individual disappears, there still remains the classifying function of the term 'author', perhaps: a category which would represent the relationships of homogeneity

[12] *Manteia*, 5 (1968), pp 12-17.

and filiation, authentication and reciprocal explanation among the various texts – precisely the activity which we saw proceed industriously in the case of Shakespeare, a practice essentially aiming to delineate the figure of the author from without, as an empty profile on which to hang processes which are at bottom commercial. Nothing more.

Removing its characteristics of interiority and intentionality, and its ownership, propriety-bound uses and valences, I propose here to dissipate the author-function and resolve it in the name, precisely in the proper name, thanks to which the word in language triumphs over the anonymous murmur, the uninterrupted buzz. The name of the artist, of the creator is a proper name. It is the name of neither the father nor the master. It is the name of the work, which names the creator. Here therefore is who/what Shakespeare is – a name, an anonymous name.

That the author dies in his work is the thesis of Maurice Blanchot – master of Foucault and Barthes in this and other ideas; a theory and thought which, unlike others, the writer Maurice Blanchot put into practice in his own life, where he followed the rule of appearing as little as possible in order to preclude the presence of an author demanding his own existence. His life was entirely devoted to literature and the silence that is proper to it.

Blanchot's thought was shared by John Keats who regarded Shakespeare as a "self-less poet" to the highest degree. As "the most impersonal" of authors. Shakespeare was sovereign among the poets because he possessed "negative capability", a capacity to efface the self through sympathetic identifications with others. In his work the author's personality is silent, while his creatures are given body and voice. Shakespeare doesn't exist, but Othello and Hamlet do. Shakespeare has the ideal poetical character, Shakespeare is a chameleon, taking as much delight in Iago as in Imogen.

In other words, Shakespeare is the name of a power of creation, thanks to which, as another great writer, Virginia Woolf, understood, writing brings us *hors de la littérature*. Shakespeare is everyone and no-one, suggests Borges, who loved playing with the ambiguity of identity. Shakespeare is not an author, Shakespeare is a creator of language, affirms Wittgenstein: a "*Sprachschöpfer*". For *playwright* that he is – that is in the mode of dramatic play, with a light touch and a personal stroke – he works and produces things, spectacles,

which might be defined as "new natural forms of language"[13]. Exactly so.

But above all Shakespeare is to me supremely and only a name. A proper name. A name that denominates a *corpus* of works. He is there, in his plays, his life is the lives of others – not only the others he invents, but the others who read him and discover life through him.

To me Shakespeare is elusive, invisible, inaccessible, and I want him to be and stay that way. I don't want to know if he loved his wife, if he betrayed her. I know there is no way I can recuperate his feelings, or his views about life: the dramatic mode he chose to work with prevents him from speaking in his own voice.

I admire and envy the sublime self-effacement celebrated by Keats. I rejoice, as Henry James put it in "The Birthplace", in the way he "covered His tracks as no other human being has ever done"[14].

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright, in collaboration with Heikki Nymann, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994, p. 84.

[14] James, p. 463.