Like its great parody, *Tristram Shandy*, autobiography can rapidly tie us up in knots. It is assumed to be a literary genre that exists independently and can be defined and analyzed. But, the closer we look, problems seem to outweigh clarity until we can legitimately begin to doubt the very existence of autobiography. Alternatively, the doubts might lead us to reconceptualize the genre to include a wider range of accounts of the self and even to embrace the metaphysical notion of the “unwritten” autobiography, a version of the self’s development that can be pieced together from multiple levels of records. In other words, we may, as third-party observers, be able to piece together the autobiography of somebody who has not written one. It is this whimsical speculation that I wish to pursue through the example of one of the most famous people who never wrote an autobiography, William Shakespeare.

Most people assume that autobiography presupposes a claim to substantial truthfulness. The emphasis may fall on the word *claim*, but it *seems* reasonable to assume that a person who buys an autobiography in a bookshop will be expecting to find at least a reasonably factual account of that person’s life from his or her privileged knowledge. Of course, even gullible readers are capable of tolerating some leeway in the degree of truth that is told. Political memoirs will be expected not only to be slanted to present the subject’s views in an act of self-justification but also to omit inconvenient personal details in the service of political interest. If, however, the subject is notorious for some
Where Is Shakespeare’s Autobiography?

Autobiography can rapidly tie us to a genre that exists independently, the closer we look, the less it can really begin to doubt whether or not we include a wider range of people’s development of the notion of the self. In this sense, the doubts about whether autobiography should be autobiographical or just a form of self-writing, whether it be autobiography, ghosted autobiography, or “authorized” biography. While her subject is an elderly artist with a fitful memory who changes her story every day, Polizzotto’s analysis strongly implies that the vagaries and selectivity of memory are not confined to the old but are endemic, making “true” autobiography impossible.

The doubts pile up the more we think about the truth-claim basis for assuming the self-evidence of autobiography’s status as a genre. If we are all made up of authentic actions in which we are “true to ourselves” and inauthentic moments when we are “not ourselves,” should autobiography represent both or just the former? What about the deathbed conversion or deathbed confession—are they automatically more “true” than the lives we have led? How about the “born again,” such as Saint Augustine or John Stuart Mill, who in hindsight read their former lives as in some way untrue and in need of suppression, or peculiar, hybrid cases like that of Hardy, who ghostwrote his own attempt at autobiography in the third person and published it under the name of his wife? Another question among many others left unasked is: how do we place a work that claims truth to the self when it unashamedly appropriates the words of poets to describe personal feelings and ideas? Is this some kind of “secondhand” autobiography, or a facet of all autobiography, pointing to its inevitable, intertextually constructed nature (cf. Johnston 28)? These questions can each be fruitfully debated and may have answers, but as a whole they problematize the very nature and function of autobiography.

Most of the answers to these questions will boil down to some invocation of authorial intention (truth telling), but, as we all know, to speculate on intention behind a written work itself is a fallacy (Ander-
son 2–3). Some theorists neatly step aside and argue that the appropriate level of referentiality or truth claim lies not in accurate recollection but in the very act of writing the autobiography, not in its recollections of the past.

Thus, if autobiographical texts do not tell us as much about the autobiographer’s past history as earlier students of the genre wished to believe, they may nevertheless have a good deal to tell us about the autobiographer in the moment of his engagement in the act of composition. (Eakin, Fictions 22)

This would at least take care of the case of the elderly artist, Elise Blumann, and of the “road to Damascus” enlightenment narratives. Other kinds of doubts present themselves, even when we find documents written by the author that must have been composed more or less contemporaneously with the activity described, such as diaries, journals, letters, e-mail messages, the fabled laundry or shopping list, and so on. What degree of seriousness should be accorded these details of daily life? Many of us consign to ephemeral writing or print only inconsequential trivia or reminders about other people’s situations rather than what is central to our own thinking or actions at the moment. For others, however, documenting such things is part of an attempt to leave footprints in the sand, to create a “true” record of their lives. Finally, to speak of “writing the self” presupposes that there is a self, something that these days is considered contentious, existing, perhaps, only in the realm of the fictional.

Such challenges are by no means my own alone. Many were raised, for example, by Paul de Man in an essay, “Autobiography as De-Facement,” which has been regarded as spelling the end of autobiography and Romantic subjectivity and selfhood (Anderson 12–17). All modes of writing are simply language, and language is always figurative and arbitrary. Once we accord a truth status to any linguistic act, we can just as easily move right across a spectrum linking autobiography, biography, and fictional autobiography to fiction pure and simple. Many theorists today concede that in every autobiography there is some sort of buried grand narrative, a “plot” in the purely literary sense, almost certainly acquired unconsciously from literature. It is just as possible to defend the position that autobiography is always fiction as to argue more or less the opposite, that all writing, however apparently fictional or impersonal, is autobiographical. It is the last of these possibilities that I want to explore, the “immanent” autobiogra-
and argue that the approach is not in accurate recollection of autobiography, not in its recollection.

It tell us as much about the students of the genre who have a great deal to tell us of his engagement in the

of the elderly artist, Elise enlightenment narratives. Even when we find documents been composed more or lesscribed, such as diaries, laundry or shopping list, we accorded these details of writing or print only in other people's situations linking or actions at the such things is part of an site a "true" record of their resupposes that there is a sustained contentious, existing, alone. Many were raised, autobiography as De-Face- the end of autobiography (Johnson 12–17). All modes of experience is always figurative and any linguistic act, we can give no linking autobiography, fiction pure and simple. Many autobiography there is a "fact" in the purely literary is only from literature. It is autobiography is always that all writing, however graphical. It is the last of "immanent" autobiogra-

phy that exists in the writing even when it makes no truth claims at all. This "hard case" provides the intriguing possibility that writers who leave no self-proclaimed autobiography are, in fact, giving us one. If this is possible, then Shakespeare is the obvious writer to turn to, since he left such a vast and diverse corpus.

The other important dimension is, of course, the historical. Early modern England emerged from a time when hagiography and demonisation could pass for biography and from a time when direct revelation or expression of the self was not a recognised mode of writing. Some claim the Montaigne of the Essays (1580s) as the inventor of distinctively modern self-writing, while others, such as Joel Fineman, credit Shakespeare's Sonnets (1590s) with that honor (Fineman). In such a time, it would be no surprise to find the lines even more blurred or nonexistent between what we would now call a set of distinctions that mark out autobiography, biography, and fiction. One of the more supple and plausible suggestions came in Stephen Greenblatt's ever-fresh study, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare. Greenblatt writes, "Perhaps the simplest observation we can make is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process" (2), a self-consciousness, which, we might in this context add, led eventually to the recognised genre of autobiography. "Self-fashioning" becomes "the achievement of a less tangible shape [than physical appearance]: a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving," in short, an articulated self. The expression of self-fashioning can come through a revealing gesture, such as Drake playing bowls before the Armada arrived or Raleigh laying down his cloak on a puddle before the queen; through verbal rumors artfully spread in a Spenserian court rife with blatant beasts; or through the category Greenblatt claims as "always, though not exclusively" applying, language. (Iago uses all three techniques in his fashioning of Othello and himself.) Out of this melting pot emerges Shakespeare. The "factual" marks he left on the world may be ones he found irrelevant and irksome, such as a will and various legal documents, all of which portray him in an unsympathetic light, while the self that he wished to leave for us—his own self-fashioning—resides in his plays, sonnets, and narrative poems. If, as Conal Condren suggests elsewhere in this book, the early moderns thought not in terms of selves but of personae, and no authentic, personal voice is left after the roles and offices have been fashioned, then it may be
legitimate to think of the "self" of a theatrical practitioner like Shakespeare as the composite sum total of all the personae he invented through language. Liberated to externalize all his fleeting thoughts and observations in this fictional guise, we might surmise that if autobiography had existed it would have made Shakespeare inhibited and wary and paradoxically less forthcoming about himself. If he realized his own life would come under scrutiny, he may have chosen not to be so candid, as he in fact is, about the light and shade of the experiences gleaned from his multifarious roles as author, actor, father, son, husband, landowner, and so on.

Fortunately for Shakespeare, and for us, the author left no autobiography, diary, or memoirs, fortunate for him because it spared him the time and trouble of doing so and thus left him time to write plays instead, and fortunate for us because it has given centuries of writers the opportunity to write them for him. It is even more surprising that, as far as I can find, there has never been a forged or fake autobiography. Even J. Payne Collier did not leave us with Shakespeare's authentic memoirs or autobiography, which would have been a much more sensational find than the odd "lost" lines from plays that he did find. Mrs. Sarah Taylor Shatford of New York missed a golden opportunity to write the first posthumous autobiography of anyone ever written when in 1916 and 1917 she spoke to Shakespeare using the Ouija board. She did extract three new poems from him, but apart from that he seemed preoccupied with wanting to undo the mischief he had sown in the world with his words "enflaming the lusts of the craven for the flesh" instead of stirring the love of God. Unfortunately, Mrs. Shatford did not even ask him such perfectly straightforward questions as why he left Anne Hathaway his second-best bed or what was Love's Labour's Won, although she claimed that he advanced some opinions on the subjects of death, sex, the Vast Beyond, reincarnation, and other matters that revealed his purgatorial suffering (Schoenbaum 492–93). If indeed autobiography lies in truthfulness to the moment of composition, in fact this might be his latest version of a life story. If Stephen Greenblatt had been able to consult Mrs. Shatford, he might have considered the material for his Hamlet in Purgatory in a different light.

Anthony Burgess, in Nothing Like the Sun: A Story of Shakespeare's Love Life, does not supply first-person narration, but at least he does claim to know the innermost thoughts and feelings of WS.

Oh, the shame, the shame. I have married beneath me. I was taken unawares by a rogue's eye. I was ruined. Tears came to the eyes of
Where Is Shakespeare's Autobiography?

WS. It was, he claimed, the spring wind freshening. They had best get home to their dinner, greasy Joan and the great lady their mother, and their anxious smiling father. (83)

We shall hear more of that anxious smiling father later. There have been films that give Shakespeare a first-person voice, as if we are watching and hearing him in action—notably John Mortimer's six-part The Life of Shakespeare and more recently Shakespeare in Love. Both mingle fiction and fact in a very self-reflexive way, and, alas, they do not claim to be autobiographies. My task of making Shakespeare somehow relevant to a book on autobiography is becoming hopeless.

Surely it helps a little that we may have unearthed a portrait of him, the glamorous discovery documented in Shakespeare's Face, introduced on the front cover with the words “Is this the face of a genius?” (Nolan). But what are we to make of this face? The slightly curled, sardonic frown and the eyes shifty would not quite meeting ours are instantly recognizable to a schoolteacher as the sly boy always sitting at the back, plotting mischief. This might confirm the persistent mythologies about Shakespeare's early penchant for practical joking and petty theft, his later penchant for plagiarism, and the occasional impressions of mischief making and time serving; but, even if the portrait is contemporary and of Shakespeare, it does not tell us much. How could it, when we know from family snapshots and press photographs that serial killers can look like professors of theology while mild librarians can have an appearance of satanic evil? “There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face” (Macbeth 1.4.12–13). To answer the book's question, no, this is not (necessarily) the face of a genius, nor is the face of the “self-satisfied pork-butcher” of the Janssen bust.

There are at least two other potential catchments if we are looking for Shakespeare's autobiography. One, his own works, I shall return to; the other is the large group of his biographers. Added to the doubt, expressed earlier, that autobiography is biography is fiction, there is another disquieting complication. One of the most distinguished and apparently reliable biographers of all, Samuel Schoenbaum, came up against a dismaying realization.

Desmond McCarthy ... said somewhere that trying to work out Shakespeare's personality was like looking at a very dark glazed picture in the National Portrait Gallery: at first you see nothing, then you begin to recognize features, and then you realize that they are your own. (vil)
Schoenbaum himself more or less acknowledges such a phenomenon, and certainly demonstrates it, in his indispensable and very readable Shakespeare's Lives. But presumably he succeeded in putting this doubt behind him before it undermined his own life's work. Given my assumed skepticism, I would have to rephrase his words to 'you realize that they are what you want to be your own' because it is possible without too much effort to find in the works of all Shakespeare's biographers a revelation of the biographer's fantasy self-image, which may be unsustainable for his family and friends. Like everybody else, academics have dreams and secret personalities just waiting to get out, and biographers can surreptitiously and without detection live out these selves. When I read Schoenbaum, for example, I find reflected the image of Master William Shakespeare, known to his friends as Will, not as mischief maker but as urbane, witty skeptic, speaking in an unmistakably American accent—in fact, as none other than the lightly patrician Professor Samuel Schoenbaum, known to friends as Sam.

By far the most influential of the constructed Shakespeare self-writings has been Edward Dowden's. His very headings in a four-stage life story denote a reassuringly sequential and optimistic reading of the playwright's inner life.

- **In the workshop** (learning his craft)
- **In the world** (politics and commerce)
- **Out of the depths** (recognition of evil, unhappiness, and disillusionment)
- **On the heights** (detachment, mellow inner peace)

This might be so effective because it taps into the hopes of a Western collective unconscious—the life we would like to write of ourselves or at least the life Dowden would like told of himself. It also has a kind of pattern that has suited the psyche of the Western professional man, and particularly the academic scholar—getting a qualification, getting a job, midlife crisis, productive retirement. Indeed, in looking at Dowden's own biography, we find statements such as, "He was dedicated to his work: he was . . . immensely conscientious and hardworking" (Serafin 77). He spent virtually all of his days in Trinity College, Dublín, having been given a chair of English at the age of twenty-six, so his eventual retirement phase was no such thing, but instead an emeritus chair, like the one he seemed to envisage Shakespeare holding when he wrote the last plays. He was seen by his friends as a poet manqué, being described by Yeats (as reported by J. B. Yeats) as one who "looked the poet and was primarily the poet" (415–14), and,
Indeed, he did write closet poetry. The midlife crisis, concealed stoically beneath his routine existence, coincided, as always in the myth, with the loss of his wife, through death in his case, but more often through divorce today. His life of Shakespeare is remarkably close to a veiled life of Edward Dowden, and when he left directions that no life of him should be written it may have been because he had written it already in this book.

E. A. J. Honigmann is a more recent biographer, whose particular contribution has been to imaginatively reconstruct Shakespeare’s early career, his “lost years,” hypothesizing that he was a tutor in a Lancashire home before becoming a dramatist in London. Elsewhere Honigmann has spoken of his own impression of Shakespeare’s personality, the self that would emerge from an autobiography.

We must learn to live with two images of Shakespeare. He could have been easy and unconstrained with his friends (“of an open and free nature,” as Jonson put it), and at the same time more forbidding to the world at large. (17)

Without pressing the point, what fascinates me about this statement, having been a close colleague of Ernst Honigmann, is that it applies perfectly to himself—an amusing, loyal, and human friend who turned to the world outside a more critical and even “forbidding” scholarly face. He says that Shakespeare was “an essentially reserved and private man . . . [with] a convivial temperament,” and I can think of no better description of Ernst himself. Perhaps in a more wishful way, he praises Shakespeare as a businessman who exercised the hardheaded acumen that made his fortune in theater in a way that mere academics never can. In fact, it is interesting that many of the biographers present similar paradoxes and contradictions in Shakespeare’s life, and it is possible that in both his works and his life he more or less created for the modern world a paradigm of the “divided” rather than “unitary” self, a notion embraced by some recent theorists of autobiography (Anderson 60–61).

Before elevating to the status of a rule Schoenbaum’s perception that in writing a biography of Shakespeare each scholar is in effect writing an autobiography of himself or herself, I should mention the latest to enter the field, where this cannot possibly apply. Katherine Duncan-Jones, in Un gente Shakespeare, holds the view that Shakespeare was mean, petty, and vindictive. She claims to present nothing more definitive than “scenes from his life,” and by snapping up unconsidered trifles (some of them not so trifling) she draws her own vivid
picture. She focuses on areas that others have either considered taboo, such as “social class, sex and money,” or glided over in reticence. Her aim is to make Shakespeare emerge as a “man among men, a writer among writers,” and she is fearlessly happy to speculate, perhaps liberated by her gender from the temptation for self-identification. Shakespeare emerges as something between an adaptable chameleon and a strategic sycophant: a generally disagreeable and even unpleasant man, eventually “gentle” in status but “ungentle” in character. He was ruthlessly ambitious in his social aspirations, fussing about getting his coat of arms, vain, and vindictive. He did not make proper provision for his wife and family, being positively rude to the former in his will by ensuring she could not enjoy his possessions after his death. The notorious second-best bed is just that. Neither the Stratford nor London parish had reason to be swayed by his reputation as a writer nor his financial success, since he consistently evaded taxes and parish dues, hoarded food during shortages, was mean-minded to the poor, and left no generous public legacies. He was probably homosexual, contemptuous of women, and had, or thought he had, syphilis, which may have been the long-term cause of his death. During the course of the book, he gently swells from plumpish to corpulent to a “mountain belly” rivaling Ben Jonson in size. None of this rings true of Duncan-Jones herself. She is the exception to the self-reflecting Schoenbaum principle of the biographer as autobiographer, although the exception may highlight the rule for all the others, and particularly the males.

I have confidently asserted that Shakespeare left no autobiography, but is this correct? Might it not be contained—though not in a literal sense—in the posthumously published First Folio, put together by his friends, together with the quartos, the sonnets, and the narrative poems? The sonnets are among the most famously self-revealing poems ever written in any language, yet as autobiography they reveal little or nothing and are shrouded in complete mystery. They were printed in 1609 by a publisher called Thomas Thorpe. That is all we know about them. Was the publication authorized by Shakespeare? We don’t know. When were they written? We don’t know, although the consensus is the 1590s, more than a decade before they were published. Who were the people whose portraits are so indelibly and memorably etched in a sonnet sequence that seems inescapably autobiographical and biographical? We don’t know. When Shakespeare wrote, so knowingly and with teasing hints at tumescent arousal, “flesh stays no farther reason, / But rising at thy name doth point out thee, / As his triumphant prize” (Sonnet 151), the one crucial thing he
neglects to tell us is this woman’s “name.” Was the order of sonnets one that Shakespeare chose, designed to tell a sequential story, a narrative? We don’t know. But, most maddening of all, there is a name, and just one name, in a dedication set with even more casual and gnomic enigma than “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” in a sentence that defies untangling and sometimes seems like the emanation of an illiterate.

To the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets Mr. W.H. all happiness and that eternitie promised by our ever-living poet wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth. T.T.

The most celebrated and insoluble mystery in literary scholarship lies in these words. Who was Mr. W.H.? The young man of the sonnets, whether W. H. or not, is indeed immortalized, but no factual detail of any kind about even his appearance, let alone his identity, is offered in the sonnets. Stephen Booth wittily summarizes what the sonnets tell us of the writer’s sexual preferences: “William Shakespeare was almost certainly homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual. The sonnets provide no evidence on the matter” (548). Stephen Greenblatt sensibly reminds us not to ask inappropriately lifelike questions of art.

Swept or unswept, stones have the names of the dead indelibly carved in them—that is the whole point of using stone—but Shakespeare’s powerful rhymes name no names. We know next to nothing about the young man—sluttish time has taken care of that—though the lines in which he is praised continue, as the poet hoped, to possess an eerie and intense life. (Hamlet in Purgatory, 313)

However, there may be another way in which writing reveals the writer. John Keats said, “A man’s life of any worth is a continual Allegory—and very few eyes can see the mystery of his life—a life like the Scriptures, figurative—a Lord Byron cuts a figure, but he is not figurative, Shakespeare led a life of allegory: his works are the comments on it” (67). Perhaps Shakespeare’s life story is contained in his complete works, if we are able to read the allegory correctly. After all, it has been said—more cruelly than Keats says it—that the only interesting thing about the lives of many writers is their works. Certainly not only Dowden but a whole tribe of psychological critics have decided that within those thirty-eight or so plays, and the handful of poems, there is more than enough material to construct the kind of person Shakespeare was, and how his life evolved, just as effectively as if he had left a candid record of his daily doings. Maybe the works
never lie. If so, then the people we should turn to for some insight into the autobiography Shakespeare never wrote are the psychoanalysts.

And there is no shortage of them, from Freud, who constructed many of his most famous concepts directly from Shakespearean sources, down to more recent Freudian studies such as C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler's *The Whole Journey: Shakespeare's Power of Development*. Most agree that the autobiography would give plenty of evidence of the dramatist having had a weak father-figure and that many of Shakespeare's achievements and aspirations were pursued as a compensation for his father's deficiencies, possibly as a defense against his resentment of father or brother (14–15). After all, he literally killed off a succession of father figures—Henry IV, Duncan, old Hamlet, Brabantio, and Lear, not to mention Falstaff, who is as hapless and impecunious as John Shakespeare seems to have been—and he didn't seem to like brothers, as witness Edmund (his own brother's name; he may even have written this unsympathetic part for his actor brother, as Duncan-Jones suggests), Duke Frederick, Oliver, and others. Insecurities about sex would loom large, focused on the binaries of male and female.

He found sexuality between man and woman a far more troubling subject—dark, soiling, frightening—a feeling he overcame only at the end of his career. He constructed his world as split between male and female, parent and child, private and public, love and war, word and deed, theater and polity, play and reality. These differences, deeply felt, harbored deep dangers... Throughout, however, his verbal wit provided him a way of equivocating, even disappearing, amid the profound dualities of his mind. He could deal with the dangers and the differences by flowing easily from one side of the chasm to the other, by being, as occasion admitted, male or female, parent or child, private man or public figure, lover or soldier, talker or doer, skeptic or idealist, rebel or conservative, presence or absence. (Holland 14–15)

However, rather disconcertingly, the psychoanalysts return us, in their different specialist terminology, to what I have called the Schoenbaum principle.

All this recapitulates the méconnaissance of Jacques Lacan's version of psychoanalysis. The plays express the fictionalities by which the ego is constructed and maintained. "Shakespeare's personality" in this sense, is just one more of the phantoms erected by our own
Where Is Shakespeare's Autobiography?

Thus, searching for Shakespeare's lost autobiography, we find the self-writing of countless psychoanalysts, and eventually we are tolled back even to our "sole selves."

A different, less psychoanalytically inclined form of autobiography might be read through Shakespeare's works in an act of ficto-autobiography. Even harmless literary critics without psychiatric training can be let loose on such an enterprise, even if the results may, like Caroline Spurgeon's, dwell on things we may not want to know, such as his eating preferences. If we assume that he wrote with something more than a cynical regard for theatrical fashion, then we might assume that his choice of plots, characters, and language reflects at least something of his own experiences. The fact that he and Anne Hathaway had twins in 1585, and that Shakespeare wrote a play about two sets of identical twins at the time when they were young children, may hint at the problems a parent of twins can have and what speculations on individual identity they might stimulate. Or, leapfrogging to his last plays, The Winter's Tale, so full of references to time, to youth and old age, may provide a sardonic "allegory" of his thoughts in middle age on sexuality in marriage. Sixteen years of a child's life is approximately the period when the mother can be said to be primarily involved in bearing and rearing that child. Do we have a glimpse, through Hermione's fate, of Anne Hathaway's self-immolation during her absentee husband's years of employment in the London theaters? There is plenty of evidence in the sonnets and several plays that Shakespeare, if not a jealous man himself, was clearly very interested in the state of sexual jealousy that affects Leonides as strongly as Othello. Such an approach would allow us to see what interested and engaged him without requiring us to impute to him motives, opinions, or psychological traits. It also cannot help but open up the mind-boggling plurality of Shakespeare's autobiographers.

Stephen Greenblatt, in his infectiously written Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare, perhaps takes "the works as the life" about as far as it can go, with some glorious consequences. Here we feel we are made privy to Shakespeare's secret life, guided by somebody as shrewdly self-effacing and empathetic as the enigmatic dramatist himself and certainly one who equally reveres the magic of words. Greenblatt defies our attempts to apply the Schoenbaum principle of seeing the biography reflected in the subject, since he is as adroit at
covering his traces as his continually conjuring and evasive subject. Greenblatt also uniquely probes what Shakespeare did not say, returning hypnotically to the subject of his love life and finding a persistent opacity in "Shakespeare's reluctance or inability to represent marriage, as it were, from the inside" (129). One who goes only so far as to express a "frustrated longing for spousal intimacy" but no fulfillment. Macbeth and his lady are, it seems, the best he can do by way of a close couple, and the best advice he can give lies in Prospero's warning that premarital sex will plague the marriage. Greenblatt suggests that this "was precisely the circumstance of the marriage of Will and Anne" (142). Shakespeare's only solace was the product of a loveless marriage, his favorite daughter, Susanna, who married so respectably, and the possibility of an inner narrative of this life story haunted Shakespeare to the end of his life and haunts Greenblatt to the last words of his book.

Some readers, if they have persevered with this chapter up till now, will find it perverse and disagreeable in a volume on early modern autobiography, like a cuckoo in the nest. However, I think some serious questions are raised, if not answered, in its apparent meanderings. At the least, a set of paradoxes emerges. One suggestion is that autobiography can never exist as a discrete genre and all we have are biographies written by the "author as living person" observed and written about in hindsight by the "author as author." Furthermore, even if a reasonably prolific author does not leave to posterity an authorized autobiography, in some ways the self-writing can still be said to exist in a metasense. The works never lie about the writer, since they are the product of his or her own unique imagination, intellect, and language. On the other hand, the plays and poems congenially and always lie, in the sense meant by Plato in Book X of The Republic: their truth value is figurative rather than literal. But the extra paradox is that the genre of autobiography itself may attain only figurative truth, since we can see only a very small portion of our lives at any one time. Shakespeare can use his plays and sonnets as self-revealing or self-effacing—through them he can be totally visible and yet totally invisible. They can be read as notes toward an autobiography of an identity, a self, but simultaneously as an evasion of the self. We cannot tell whether Shakespeare wrote to explore his own reality or avoid it in escapism. Another possibility that has emerged is that his works write our own autobiographies. They are the ultimate reflectors, allowing us to see only ourselves, giving us a language, imagery, and a set of narratives to construct our own lives. And yet, as
Where Is Shakespeare’s Autobiography?

I suggested at the outset, the mirrors are always distorting, proving that even our most soulful attempts at self-truth are scripts written for us by another, a mishmash of partial truth and total fiction. Or, alternatively, to what extent is he just exercising the skill of a competent playwright constructing different characters, nothing to do with his own self-image and nothing to do with ours? Whichever way I look, I find myself returned to the surprisingly simple, opening words of a play, *Hamlet*, which has been turned into one of the most culturally significant works ever written and was regarded by Coleridge, at least, as his own autobiography and probably Shakespeare’s: “Who’s there?” Shakespeare, that preeminent early modern writer, never provides the answers, but his questions can open up other fascinating inquiries that allow us to acknowledge the complexity of autobiography in any age.

WORKS CITED


Serafin, Steven, ed. Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century British Literary Biographers. Detroit: Gale Research, 1995.

