

‘Everything and Nothing’: Shakespeare in Blanchot

Mario Aquilina

University of Malta
E-mail: mario.aquilina@um.edu.mt

Abstract

This article discusses several moments in Maurice Blanchot’s work in which he delves into the space of Shakespeare’s oeuvre. For close contemporaries of Blanchot like Derrida and Levinas, Shakespeare is a decisive figure who inspires some of their major work. On the other hand, Shakespeare is not someone to whom Blanchot turns in decisive ways, except, perhaps, in a discussion of ‘Hamlet’ in *The Space of Literature*. The article discusses why Blanchot’s thinking may resist moving into the space of Shakespeare and proposes that, for Blanchot, Shakespeare’s name is inextricable from notions of human freedom and mastery that the modern work, which Blanchot is primarily interested in, dismisses. The (non-)relation with Shakespeare explored here reveals itself to be significant in what it discloses about Blanchot’s thought and the way he positions himself in relation to other writers.

Keywords: *Blanchot, Shakespeare, Derrida, Levinas, Hamlet, space, literature, impossibility, humanism, authorship*

Thinking in the Space of Shakespeare

In a 1989 interview, Jacques Derrida answered a question about ‘Aphorism Countertime’, an essay on Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’, with a confession: ‘I would very much like to read and write in the space or heritage of Shakespeare, in relation to whom I have infinite admiration and gratitude; I would like to become (alas, it’s pretty late) a “Shakespeare expert”; I know that everything is in Shakespeare: everything and the rest, so everything or nearly’.¹ Derrida’s desire to think ‘in the space or heritage of Shakespeare’ would manifest itself a few years later in *Spectres of Marx* in which Derrida writes in the afterlife of Marx but also that of Shakespeare, and more specifically, ‘Hamlet’.²

As Richard Wilson shows, the engagement with Shakespeare, in relation to whom Derrida feels ‘respect’ and ‘intimidat[ion]’,³ is widespread in French theory.⁴ Bourdieu, Cixous, Deleuze, Foucault and Girard frequently think with and through Shakespeare. Levinas does this repeatedly, to the extent that in *Time and the Other* he feels the need to justify his ‘return once again to Shakespeare, in whom’, he admits, he has ‘overindulged in the course of these lectures’ by claiming that ‘it sometimes seems to

¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

² Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Jacques Derrida, ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’, trans. Lawrence Venuti, *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (2001), 174–200. In this essay, Derrida reads Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* in terms of relevance, mercy and translation.

³ Derrida, ‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’, 63.

⁴ Richard Wilson, *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[him] that all philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare'. In asserting this, Levinas does not simply anticipate Derrida's claim that 'everything is in Shakespeare' but, more specifically, directs our attention to the centrality of Shakespeare in Continental Philosophy.⁵ The space that Levinas sees Shakespeare as occupying—an origin of philosophy—is often reserved for Plato, about whom Alfred North Whitehead wrote that '[t]he safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato'.⁶ Shakespeare's work, for Levinas, is thus not just a space within which one may find a depository of useful examples for thinking—if everything is in Shakespeare, then one is bound to find oneself in it at some point—but also a space in which thought itself happens. Thought does not simply find its exemplification in Shakespeare's verses, but also its space and origin.

The centrality of Shakespeare for Levinas lies primarily in the thinking of the impossibility of death as a 'consequence of the conception of the *there is*', or 'il y a'.⁷ The *there is*, Levinas writes, 'consists in promoting a notion of being without nothingness, which leaves no hole and permits no escape'.⁸ Turning away from Heidegger's thinking of anxiety as 'the experience of nothingness'—and anticipating Blanchot's repeated return to death as impossibility, which I will discuss below—Levinas thinks of anxiety in terms of 'the fact that it is impossible to die'.⁹ And, in developing his thought, he refers to three of Shakespeare's tragic heroes. Macbeth keeps on fighting 'even when he has recognized the uselessness of combat', that is, when he has realised that Birnam wood has indeed come to Dunsinane and that in Macduff he is fighting someone who is not 'of woman Born'.¹⁰ Macbeth, in doing so, Levinas tells us, does not seize 'death' itself but 'a last chance' that appears even 'in the very margin [...] at the moment of death'. Mastery for the hero is not to be found in death, since 'nothingness is impossible', but in the hope that the present gives.¹¹ Juliet's feeling that she 'keep[s] the power to die' in Act 3 of 'Romeo and Juliet' reveals a constant fact of tragedy, that is, the possibility of suicide as 'the final recourse against the absurd', but for Levinas Hamlet shows the greater insight as he understands that 'the "not to be" is perhaps impossible and he can no longer master the absurd, even by suicide'.¹² Indeed, for Levinas, '*Hamlet* is precisely a lengthy testimony to this impossibility of assuming death'.¹³

In the light of Heidegger's idea that thinking is a form of thanking—an association which he traces to the etymological roots of the two words ('*Denken*' or 'think' and '*Danken*' or 'thank')¹⁴—Levinas's words reveal a sense of gratitude towards Shakespeare that, by the twentieth century, had become somewhat common. The eminent Shakespearean, Harold Bloom, goes so far as to claim that 'only the Bible has a

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1987), 72.

⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28), ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929]), 39.

⁷ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50.

⁸ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50.

⁹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 51.

¹⁰ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50.

¹¹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 73.

¹² Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 50.

¹³ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 73.

¹⁴ See Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking*, Part 2, Lecture III, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper Collins, 1976), 138–147.

circumference that is everywhere, like Shakespeare's'.¹⁵ Echoing Thomas Carlyle, Bloom insists that 'no Western writer [...] is equal to Shakespeare as an intellect, and among writers [he] would include the principal philosophers, the religious sages, and the psychologists from Montaigne through Nietzsche to Freud'.¹⁶ For Bloom, Shakespeare is the one who comes closest to being 'a mortal god', especially because of his invention of 'personality'.¹⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, in a short story whose title is a quotation from one of John Keats's letters,¹⁸ 'Everything and Nothing', takes this idea further when he makes Shakespeare meet God, who comments on his similarity with Shakespeare in being 'many persons—and none'.¹⁹ Shakespeare, the analogy goes, is like God, everything, and hence nothing. He occupies all space, and therefore one is always already in his shadow. The question is: 'Can we conceive of ourselves without Shakespeare?'²⁰ Bloom is sceptical. Thought itself must arise in the space of Shakespeare, and this, for Bloom, is the greatest value in Shakespeare's work: 'The ultimate use of Shakespeare is to let him teach you to think too well, to whatever truth you can sustain without perishing'.²¹

Blanchot Outside the Space of Shakespeare

Considering the important role that Shakespeare has in mid-to-late-twentieth century French theory and philosophy, it is significant that unlike in the work of contemporaries and 'friends' like Derrida and Levinas, with whose thought Blanchot is in constant dialogue, Shakespeare is a somewhat marginal figure in Blanchot's writing.²² Blanchot never expresses a desire to be in the 'space of' Shakespeare, and he limits himself to few remarks about the English playwright, almost all of which not even a full sentence in length. Shakespeare's name mostly appears in passing, being used as part of a list of writers about whom Blanchot makes general claims in developing a point about literature whose scope transcends the actual names in the list. To my knowledge, Blanchot quotes Shakespeare only once, and significantly, when he does so, he attributes the quote to Hamlet not to Shakespeare: "'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,'" says Hamlet, "when we have shuffled off this mortal coil...".²³

In 'Two Versions of the Imaginary', Hamlet's words about the dreams that come after death serve as an analogy for Blanchot's thinking of the image: 'The image, present behind each thing, and which is like the dissolution of this thing and its subsistence in its dissolution, also has behind it that heavy sleep of death in which

¹⁵ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 3.

¹⁶ Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, 1–2.

¹⁷ Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, 3–4.

¹⁸ John Keats, 'To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818', in *Selected Letters by John Keats*, ed. Grant F. Scott, rev. edn. (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009), 195.

¹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Everything and Nothing', in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999), 320.

²⁰ Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, 13.

²¹ Bloom, *The Invention of the Human*, 10.

²² For Blanchot, Levinas, is his 'oldest friend' and someone for whom he feels a 'well known' debt. (*Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. Zakir Paul [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010] 124). See also Maurice Blanchot, 'Thanks (Be Given) to Jacques Derrida (1990)', in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

²³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 255.

dreams threaten'.²⁴ Hamlet imagines that which comes after death through the metaphor of 'dreams'. His words, like the image, present 'the thing as distance, present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared'.²⁵ The image is like a cadaver, there before us and yet not 'a reality at all', there in front of us and yet 'not convincingly here'. Extending Levinas's thinking of Hamlet's soliloquy as witnessing the impossibility of grasping death as nothingness, Blanchot is, like Levinas before him, contesting Heidegger's thinking of death as possibility. Blanchot writes about the impossibility of death throughout his career, and the idea is one of the 'few fundamental concerns' for which, as de Man puts it, Blanchot shows an 'almost obsessive preoccupation'.²⁶ It appears, for instance, in an early essay on Kafka, in which Blanchot reads Kafka's story, 'The Hunter Gracchus', with a thoroughness that he never reserves for Shakespeare. Here, he writes of the 'disaster' that is 'the impossibility of death': 'There is no end, there is no possibility of being done with the day, with the meaning of things, with hope'.²⁷ It also appears, at the other end of Blanchot's writing career, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, where Blanchot writes of the 'disaster' as that 'which does not have the ultimate for a limit'.²⁸

In 'Two Versions of the Imaginary', Blanchot cites Hamlet's musings about the impossibility of death to contest what Paul de Man describes as Heidegger's belief that 'the movement of a poetic consciousness could ever lead us to assert our ontological insight in a positive way'.²⁹ In Hamlet, Blanchot, like Levinas, finds a character who proposes a strong precedent to his thinking of impossibility, that is, 'of a relation escaping power'.³⁰ While Hamlet contemplates whether to be or not to be, his thinking of death as that which may 'end / The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to'³¹ soon slips into a metaphoric thinking of death in terms of the intermediary state of 'sleep'. From death as something that may be mastered by 'tak[ing] arms against a sea of troubles', death turns into that which masters us by the very impossibility of us mastering it absolutely.³² Heidegger's idea of art as foundational of the state and of poetry as self-presence finds its limits in Hamlet's awareness that death is a space of impossibility, beyond human power. To quote Wilson, we may say that for Blanchot 'art cannot be foundational as it has no end, any more than waking, sleeping, day, night, freedom, or necessity, are ever final'.³³ Hamlet considers the option of terminating his own life—of bringing his life to its end—but realises that death cannot be the end. As Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*,

²⁴ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 255.

²⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 255–56.

²⁶ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1983), 61.

²⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 7–8.

²⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 28.

²⁹ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 76.

³⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 38.

³¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, The Folger Shakespeare Library, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012), Act 3.i. 69–71.

³² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3.i. 67.

³³ Wilson, *Shakespeare in French Theory*, 61.

'The dream is without end, waking is without beginning; neither one nor the other ever reaches itself'.³⁴

The relevance of Hamlet's words for Blanchot is clear, and Blanchot's quoting of Hamlet in 'Two Versions of the Imaginary' reads like a full endorsement of the Danish prince's insights. However, while Hamlet's words in his most famous speech resonate with Blanchot—he also mentions them briefly, without quoting them, when describing the monologue of Mallarmé's 'Igitur' as a 'prolongation of Hamlet's soliloquy'³⁵—the specificity of any lines from the rest of Shakespeare's oeuvre does not attract Blanchot's interest in a significant way. This may be contrasted, for instance, to Blanchot's relation to Celan in 'The Last to Speak', in which Blanchot's reading of Celan transforms itself into a writing *with* Celan. As Ginette Michaud argues, in 'The Last to Speak', 'the voices of one and the other become more indistinguishable, while remaining apart and distinct'.³⁶ In relation to Celan, Blanchot feels the lure of 'fascination', tangible in both the call and the withdrawal of the poetic.³⁷ His response to this is to, as Lars Iyer puts it, think 'from a language, to essay a response in a language and an idiom'.³⁸ Blanchot thinks *from* the language of Celan, *through* Celan and *with* Celan. He does the same with Char. In Hamlet's speech, however, Blanchot finds one ready-made example of an aspect of his thought, and it would be difficult to build a case for a relation of fascination between the two. This almost complete indifference to Shakespeare with the exception of a line from 'Hamlet', I believe, is worth highlighting, particularly when Blanchot's closest contemporaries do considerably more with Shakespeare's plays and with the poetry of the lines. The non-encounter with Shakespeare brings to light specific aspects of Blanchot's thinking, and more specifically of the space that he envisages for literature. And it is this absence that the rest of the article will explore.

The relevance of the argument may be contextualised by referring to the range of writers that Blanchot focuses on throughout his career. The work in French of Artaud, Baudelaire, Char, Gide, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Malroux, Proust, Sade, Sartre and Valéry, and the work in German of Broch, Celan, Hölderlin, Kafka, Mann, Musil and Rilke, is most likely to draw Blanchot's attention. However, the French thinker does extend his gaze beyond the confines of Western Continental Europe with extended pieces, for example, on Dostoevsky³⁹ and Borges.⁴⁰ He also frequently returns to Greek mythology, most notably the figure of Orpheus.⁴¹ More significantly, the English language origins of texts does not dissuade him from writing full essays on several Anglo-American writers, including William Blake,⁴² Hermann Melville,⁴³ and Henry James.⁴⁴

³⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 36.

³⁵ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 115.

³⁶ Ginette Michaud, 'Singbarer Rest: Friendship, Impossible Mourning (Celan, Blanchot, Derrida)', *The Oxford Literary Review* 31.1 (2009): 80.

³⁷ Maurice Blanchot, 'The Last to Speak', in *A Voice from Elsewhere*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007), 83.

³⁸ Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 41.

³⁹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 96–102.

⁴⁰ Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 93–96.

⁴¹ Blanchot, 'Orpheus's Gaze', in *The Space of Literature*, 171–176. See also Maurice Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), which includes essays on 'The Myth of Sisyphus' (53–58), 'The Myth of Orestes' (59–64), and 'The Myth of Phaedra' (65–70).

⁴² 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', in *Faux Pas*, 28–32.

In a study looking at the publication context and the conceptual underpinnings of Blanchot's literary criticism, Mark Hewson accounts for Blanchot's choice of authors and texts for commentary by claiming that his work 'is guided and informed by a theoretical and historical reflection on what is distinctive about the situation and the characteristics of *modern* literature'.⁴⁵ With the term, 'modern', Hewson does not exclusively refer to the literature of the early part of the twentieth century but to a 'philosophical-historical interpretation of modernity' that is 'not circumscribed by specific national contexts and literary movements and periods'.⁴⁶ More specifically, for Hewson, Blanchot is primarily, and almost exclusively, concerned with those writers for whom, as Blanchot writes in 'Literature and the Right to Death', 'literature becomes a question'⁴⁷ and in whose work literature is driven by a form of negativity—in its relation to the world—that gives it 'the greatest creative ambition'.⁴⁸ 'If literature coincides with nothing for just an instant,' Blanchot says, 'it is immediately everything, and this everything begins to exist: what a miracle!'⁴⁹

The terms used by Blanchot to talk about literature's turning to itself in a crisis of self-legitimation—literature's being 'everything' deriving from its being 'nothing'—curiously echo Keats's well-known discussion of Shakespeare's 'negative capability' as a chameleon poet. For Keats, the 'poetical Character [...] is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated'.⁵⁰ For Keats, Shakespeare embodies negative capability precisely in dismissing his identity and 'continually in for* [informing] and filling some other Body'.⁵¹ As suggested in another letter by Keats, the 'great poet' seeks beauty in everything, does not hanker after 'fact & reason', and is 'capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'.⁵² When Keats writes about 'everything' and 'nothing' then, his focus is on the poet's chameleon self, its potential to be everything because it allows itself to be nothing.

In 'Literature and the Right to Death', Blanchot uses the terms, 'everything' and 'nothing' too, but he does so to talk about literature and not the poet's or author's self in relation to the world. The 'everything' and 'nothing' he is interested in are the space in which literature becomes something out of being nothing: its being founded on its impossibility. However, as a survey of Blanchot's mentions of Shakespeare will show, with very few exceptions, when the French thinker refers to the playwright, he writes about Shakespeare as author and authority, or as a name that stands for certain conceptions of authorship rather than as a writer in whose work literature—the very being of the work—becomes a question. This is the case, for instance, in the essay 'At Every Extreme', in which, following Hegel, Blanchot thinks of the end of art or of art at the end of art: 'the surprise of what *is*, without being possible, the surprise of what must begin at every extreme, the work of the end of the world, art that finds its beginning

⁴³ 'The Secret of Melville', in *Faux Pas*, 239–43.

⁴⁴ 'The Turn of the Screw', in *The Book to Come*, 126–133. See also *The Book to Come*, 153.

⁴⁵ Mark Hewson, *Blanchot and Literary Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1.

⁴⁶ Hewson, *Blanchot and Literary Criticism*, xiii.

⁴⁷ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 300.

⁴⁸ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 301.

⁴⁹ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 301–2.

⁵⁰ Keats, 'To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818', 194–195.

⁵¹ Keats, 'To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818', 195.

⁵² Keats, 'To George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817', in *Selected Letters by John Keats*, 60.

only where there is no more art and where its conditions are lacking'.⁵³ 'How is Literature Possible?' refers to art that exists in the space in which it is seemingly impossible to exist. Here, he does this through the notion of the 'error' or 'mistake' with which 'every artist' is linked through a 'particular intimate relation'. And after Mallarmé, the examples that Blanchot gives are Homer and Shakespeare, whose mistake 'is perhaps, for both, the fact of not existing'.⁵⁴ In this essay, Shakespeare's name is used as part of an introductory movement in order to lay the terms of the discussion to follow, and, following this solitary mention, Blanchot does not return to Shakespeare. Like Homer's, Shakespeare's art derives from the 'exceptional fault' of its author not existing or of being nothing. What Blanchot means by this is unclear as he does not pursue the implications of the example he has given. However, there are at least two ways in which Homer and Shakespeare are linked in this respect. In the case of both, who the author of the work that goes by their name is remains, to different degrees and in different ways, unresolved. Secondly, the identity of the author, whoever may have written the work, arises as a 'nothing' that is consequent to the 'everything' that the works depict. Hence, the 'everything' in Shakespeare's *oeuvre* may arise from the absence of a fixed self in the author, but this is a different issue altogether from the fact of literature itself existing through negation. In Shakespeare, and Homer, Blanchot implies, it is not literature that becomes a question but the author himself.

A similar conception of Shakespeare arises in 'Molière', where authorship is again the main issue and where Shakespeare is mentioned among others. Here, Blanchot starts with the 'question that all those who love Molière, Dante, Shakespeare ask themselves, with the feeling that it eludes any answer', that is, the question of the relationship between the life of these authors and their work. 'The classic authors', argues Blanchot, 'let us guess nothing about what they are when they write'. Shakespeare, once again, is relevant as someone whose identity is not revealed by his writing.⁵⁵

The essay, 'Museum Sickness' includes one of the few other uses of Shakespeare's name by Blanchot. Blanchot starts by quoting Ernst Robert Curtius, who reflects on the 'possibility of always having Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe completely at our disposal', a statement which Curtius means in terms of the possibility of having printed text in front of us, but which Blanchot immediately undercuts, primarily in terms of the impossibility of grasping the 'strangeness of books'.⁵⁶ While Blanchot uses Homer to extend his critique of Curtius—and he also brings in Dante, Char and Mallarmé, among others, in support—he does not mention Shakespeare in the essay again. In another peripheral reference in *Lautréamont and Sade*, Shakespeare is listed last, alongside Baudelaire, Dante, Byron, Goethe and Sue, as one of the potential 'influences' on Lautréamont.⁵⁷ Again, the reference is not pursued.

In 'The Athenaeum', Shakespeare's name appears in passing and in parenthesis; it is mentioned, somewhat obscurely, to describe 'men as responsive as [Gotthold] Lessing (and who were closer to Shakespeare than to Voltaire)' who made the

⁵³ Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 107

⁵⁴ Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 107.

⁵⁵ Blanchot, *Faux Pas*, 259.

⁵⁶ Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 42 citing Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. by Willard Trask (Princeton University Press, 2013 [1953]), 15.

⁵⁷ Blanchot, *Lautréamont and Sade*, trans. Stuart Kendell and Michelle Kendell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 82.

Enlightenment ‘shine in a dawn of crisis above a literature still to come’.⁵⁸ This is done in the context of a discussion of German romanticism and its continuation in France, where Surrealism recognises in it ‘what it rediscovers on its own: poetry, the force of absolute freedom’. Within this discussion, Shakespeare is associated with the ‘lights’ of the ‘*Aufklärung*’ (Enlightenment) against which Blanchot posits the ‘night without illusion’ and ‘radical negation’ of romanticism in France. Within the complex web that Blanchot weaves at the beginning of this essay, Shakespeare is never discussed directly, but he is posited, metonymically, as someone with whom to compare those who do not belong to the ‘new feeling about art and literature that paves the way for other changes, all oriented toward challenging the traditional forms of political organization’.⁵⁹ Blanchot’s thoughts about Surrealism, which he deems to be a radical rejection ‘of what counts as art’, may indicate, through inversion, what Shakespeare does not stand for in Blanchot’s work.⁶⁰ For Blanchot, ‘surrealism is always of our time’ through its being ‘committed’, while paradoxically demanding ‘an absolute freedom’.⁶¹ It is the literature of the revolution, of refusal and negation, rather than of the light and affirmation.

Perhaps, what brings the relevance of all these mentions of Shakespeare into focus is Blanchot’s early essay on ‘The Pure Novel’ (1943), which, while only referring to Shakespeare briefly and focusing primarily on the genre of the novel rather than drama or poetry, may still be read as indicative of why Shakespeare and Blanchot are involved in an encounter that fails to happen. Blanchot distinguishes between the ‘Balzac-type novel’ and the ‘Lautréamont-type novel’. In the Balzac-type, while the inner world may not correspond to the common model of reality, the outside world created corresponds perfectly to that model. It introduces enough elements for the reader to recognise himself in it. The Lautréamont-type, on the other hand, does not try to create a likeness but ‘seeks to fashion, to mould the form in which it will become manifest. The exterior should correspond to the interior, not to those conventional practices, those common but arbitrary beliefs that are the basis of social life’. Sidestepping verisimilitude, the modern novel ‘secretes its own world’, and its driving force is the quest for the pure novel, which is the harmonisation of the inside and outside of the novel’s creation. The pure novel is a form of ‘art that will obey aesthetic necessity alone, an art that, rather than combine representation of things with certain laws of sensibility, renounces imitation and even the conventions of meaning’.⁶²

In response to the question of what motivates the quest for the pure novel, even if no exemplary work of this kind exists, Blanchot appeals to Friedrich Gundolf’s distinction between attractive and expansive creation and claims that the author of the pure novel has an attractive mind. Attractive creation ‘shapes the universe in terms of its self, seeking by attraction to accord the universe with that self, which then becomes its centre, in the manner of Dante’.⁶³ This kind of author accepts the data from the world only to shape them in the light of his vision. Expansive creation, on the other hand, ‘pours itself into the world, frees itself of its excessive plenitude to vitalize and take possession of the world, in the manner of’ Balzac, but also, Blanchot tells us, of Shakespeare. In phrases which echo Keats’s description of Shakespeare’s negative

⁵⁸ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 352.

⁵⁹ Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 351.

⁶⁰ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 301.

⁶¹ Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, 96–97.

⁶² Blanchot, *The Blanchot Reader*, 40.

⁶³ Blanchot, *The Blanchot Reader*, 40.

capability—his dismissal of a core of selfhood—Blanchot writes how the expansive author, like Shakespeare, ‘communicates life and strength to a reality that is sufficient for his needs; he extends himself, overflowing into the demarcated frame of the universe’.⁶⁴

Keats’s contemporary, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, provides us with an even more clearly analogous description of Shakespeare to Blanchot’s concept of the expansive genius. Within Romantic criticism of Shakespeare and even before, Shakespeare often appears as the Protean artist par excellence. Contrasting the two giants of the English literary canon, Shakespeare and Milton, Coleridge elaborates this quality in Shakespeare in terms that clearly anticipate Gundolf’s distinction between attractive and expansive genius that Blanchot would then pick up in ‘The Pure Novel’:

While the former [Shakespeare] darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the latter [Milton] attracts all forms and things to himself, and into the unity of his own IDEAL. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of MILTON; while SHAKESPEARE becomes all things, yet forever remaining himself.⁶⁵

Shakespeare, for Coleridge, but also for Blanchot, presents to us a ‘very nature Shakespearianized’.⁶⁶ Shakespeare gives us an imitation of reality (not a copy or what Coleridge calls ‘the Thing itself’) whilst, as the French thinker puts it, ‘extend[ing] himself’ into the world he creates. While Milton has an ‘attract[ive]’, centripetal mind, Shakespeare’s is expansive and centrifugal.

Blanchot conceives the expansive genius in terms of a relation to the world which it sustains in its work. The attractive mind, on the other hand, has a more destructive relation to the world. In the pure novel, it ‘draws the world to itself’ only to ‘annihilate it’. The world, which should provide raw material to the creative self, seems to be exhausted, and it has lost its originality, and thus the attractive mind feels tempted to reject it to express its own original experience. And here, Blanchot’s preference for the pure novel—and, by implication, the attractive mind—is thinly veiled: ‘In this respect’, he states, ‘the pure novel, whatever its failings, may deserve more attention than the accomplished works of objective narrative. It is in search of the unknown. It demands the inaccessible’. The citation of Edouard’s words from *The Counterfeiters* is very indicative: ‘the only ones who count are those who set off for the unknown’.⁶⁷ New worlds can only be discovered by those who lose sight of the shore. Blanchot’s positing of Shakespeare, along with writers like Balzac, as an ‘expansive genius’ may indicate one reason why Blanchot is rarely in the space of Shakespeare. The space of literature, as Blanchot conceives it, pulls in the opposite direction to the relation to the world that Blanchot sees Shakespeare having as an expansive genius. Thus, rather than Shakespeare, when Blanchot approaches the English-speaking canon, he goes, for instance, to Joyce and Woolf, authors of what Blanchot describes as ‘exceptional works in which a limit is reached’.⁶⁸ Rather than the masterpieces that create a world, Blanchot

⁶⁴ Blanchot, *The Blanchot Reader*, 42.

⁶⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2: 27–28.

⁶⁶ Kathleen Coburn, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols. (London: Routledge, 1957–2002), 2: 274.

⁶⁷ Blanchot, *The Blanchot Reader*, 42.

⁶⁸ Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 100.

veers towards ‘rare, fugitive’⁶⁹ works that far from inventing the human, like Bloom claims Shakespeare did, ‘engender nothing’. They don’t reveal the world to the readers but ‘close a door’, revealing the law that they deviate from in doing so.⁷⁰

In ‘The Future and the Question of Art’, Blanchot envisages an age for art beyond humanism and, by implication, beyond Shakespeare. Extending a Hegelian conception of the linearity of history, he argues that at that specific moment in time, art ‘has to become its own presence’ seeking to affirm ‘art’ rather than anything else, be it history, culture, politics, the beauty of language or even the artist himself. This is the literary absolute, a work as an event with non-teleocratic determination, that, for Blanchot is concerned primarily with its ‘own essence’.⁷¹ This, for Blanchot, is a first time in history: just ‘at the moment when through the force of the times art disappears’, it also appears ‘for the first time as a search in which something essential is at stake, where what counts is no longer the artist or active labor or any of the values upon which the world is built’.⁷²

The (Non-)Encounter of Blanchot and Shakespeare

Shakespeare, in Blanchot, appears a handful of times as a name—often in a list; only once are his words quoted. And indeed, when this happens, it is Hamlet, the character, not Shakespeare, the writer, who is cited. The above discussion suggests some potential reasons for this while leaving a fundamental question not only unanswered but also untouched: Is Blanchot’s conception of Shakespeare a fair or accurate evaluation of the English playwright’s work?

This is a legitimate question and one which could be pursued, for instance, through an attempt to apply Blanchot’s own thinking to Shakespeare’s work, that is, by placing Shakespeare in the space of Blanchot even though Blanchot himself seems to resist doing this.⁷³ However, it is worth keeping in mind an essential aspect of Blanchot’s writing about other writers that de Man discusses in the essay, ‘Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot’. Ultimately, as de Man shows by revealing how Blanchot’s ‘presentation of Mallarmé at times misses the mark’,⁷⁴ Blanchot’s reading of others is more accurately described as self-reading than literary criticism. What he presents us with is not a textual analysis focused on elucidation, evaluation and appreciation of the canon. Our understanding of the authors he analyses is ‘barely enriched’, according to de Man.⁷⁵ We do not find in Blanchot’s readings of literature the intention to illustrate or clarify the work of other writers. After all, the place of the publication of Blanchot’s criticism were journals and then books outside the context of the university as an institution that transmits knowledge.

⁶⁹ Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 100.

⁷⁰ Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 109–10.

⁷¹ Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 219.

⁷² Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 219–220.

⁷³ See for instance, Mario Aquilina “‘Let me (not) read you’: Countersigning Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116’, *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1.2 (2011), 79-90. See also John J Joughin, ‘Lear’s Afterlife’ in *Shakespeare Survey: King Lear and Its Afterlife: An Annual Survey*, volume 55, ed. Peter Holland (2002), 76–78. This type of analysis is quite rare. Wilson, for example, only writes a few lines on Blanchot.

⁷⁴ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 71.

⁷⁵ de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 62.

What Blanchot's readings reveal are the contours of his own face, primarily, as a writer rather than as a critic. Thus, when, for instance, in 'The Last to Speak', he reads Celan closely, quoting frequently and extensively from his work, we get the impression of a writer writing through and with Celan rather than a critic elucidating another poet. There is a cross-pollination of sorts, an asynchronous collaborative effort of the kind that Blanchot also produces with Char, Mallarmé, Beckett, Kafka and others, but not Shakespeare, whose work, historically located in the Renaissance, is, for Blanchot, still attached to notions of human freedom and mastery that the modern work dismisses by turning towards itself as a question.

Bibliography

1. Aquilina, Mario. "Let me (not) read you": Countersigning Shakespeare's Sonnet 116'. *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 1.2 (2011): 79-90.
2. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.
3. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Hanson. Minneapolis and London: The University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
4. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Work of Fire*. Translated by Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
5. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
6. Blanchot, Maurice. 'Thanks (Be Given) to Jacques Derrida (1990)'. In *The Blanchot Reader*. Edited by Michael Holland. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996. 317-323.
7. Blanchot, Maurice. *Friendship*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
8. Blanchot, Maurice. *Faux Pas*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001.
9. Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Translated by Charlotte Mandel. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
10. Blanchot, Maurice. *Lautréamont and Sade*. Translated by Stuart Kendell and Michelle Kendell. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
11. Blanchot, Maurice. 'The Last to Speak'. In *A Voice from Elsewhere*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007. 53-93.
12. Blanchot, Maurice. *Maurice Blanchot: Political Writings, 1953-1993*. Translated by Zakir Paul. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.
13. Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.
14. Borges, Jorge Luis. 'Everything and Nothing'. In *Collected Fictions*. Translated by Andrew Hurley Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999. 319-320.
15. Coburn, Kathleen. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5 vols. London: Routledge, 1957-2002.
16. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. Edited by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
17. Curtius, Ernst Robert. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Translated by Willard Trask. Princeton University Press, 2013 [1953].
18. de Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Edition. London: Routledge, 1983.
19. Derrida, Jacques. *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

20. Derrida, Jacques. 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida'. In *Acts of Literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge. New York and London: Routledge, 1992, 33-75.
21. Derrida, Jacques. 'What is a "Relevant" Translation?'. Translated by Lawrence Venuti. *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (2001): 174-200.
22. Heidegger, Martin. *What is Called Thinking*. Translated by J. Glenn Gray. New York: Harper Collins, 1976.
23. Hewson, Mark. *Blanchot and Literary Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 2011.
24. Iyer, Lars. *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
25. Joughin, John J. 'Lear's Afterlife'. In *Shakespeare Survey: King Lear and Its Afterlife: An Annual Survey*, vol. 55. Edited by Peter Holland. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 67-81.
26. Keats, John, 'To George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817'. In *Selected Letters by John Keats*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009. 59-62.
27. Keats, John, 'To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818'. In *Selected Letters by John Keats*, Revised edition. Edited by Grant F. Scott. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009. 194-196.
28. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1987.
29. Michaud, Ginette. 'Singbarer Rest: Friendship, Impossible Mourning (Celan, Blanchot, Derrida)'. *The Oxford Literary Review* 31.1 (2009): 79-114.
30. Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. The Folger Shakespeare Library. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012.
31. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh During the Session 1927-28). Edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: The Free Press, 1978 [1929].
32. Wilson, Richard. *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows*. London: Routledge, 2007.

„Totul și Nimic”. Blanchot în spațiul shakespearian

Acest articol discută câteva ipostaze ale operei lui Maurice Blanchot prin care acesta pătrunde în spațiul shakespearian. Pentru contemporanii apropiați lui Blanchot, precum Derrida sau Levinas, Shakespeare a fost o figură marcantă care a inspirat o parte a operei lor capitale. Blanchot nu recurge în mod constant la Shakespeare, cu excepția, probabil, a fragmentelor referitoare la Hamlet din *Spațiul literar*. Articolul discută de ce gândirea lui Blanchot poate rezista mutării în spațiul shakespearian și propune teoria conform căreia pentru Blanchot, numele lui Shakespeare este în mod inextricabil legat de noțiunile de libertate umană și de putere, noțiuni pe care opera modernă, în care interesul lui Blanchot este major, o respinge. (Non)relația cu Shakespeare dezbătută în acest studiu se revelează ca fiind semnificativă în ceea ce ne spune despre gândirea lui Blanchot și modul în care acesta se poziționează în relație cu alți scriitori.