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‘I am not what I am’: Paradox and Indirect Communication—the case of the comic god and the dramaturgical self

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Abstract

An exploration of the self in dramaturgical societies: This is the double, duplicitous, witty self, the one who communicates indirectly through characters and masks, the self who is a personality, who knowingly plays a role on the public stage, and who inhabits a wry, not to say awry, paradoxical world created by a mischievous comic God. A motley bunch of characters wander across the stage of this article. These include recusant Catholics, American sociologists, theologians of paradox, philosophers of comedy, Oscar Schindler, Mick Jagger, William Shakespeare, G.K. Chesterton, as well as various assorted epicurean puritans, inventive liars, elusive playwrights, pompous intellectuals, sleuthing heroes from detective fiction, ambitious pretenders, satirists of newspaper folly, media nit-wits, boys playing girls playing boys, and, if you are really good, girls playing boys playing girls. All of them bearing testament to Viola’s immortal line: ‘I am not what I am’.

George: Rather close line there, eh sir? That phone system is a shambles, no wonder we haven’t had any orders!

Edmund: Oh, on the contrary, George, we’ve had plenty of orders. We have orders for six meters of Hungarian crushed velvet curtain material, four rock salmon and a ha’pence of chips and a cab for a Mr. Redgrave picking up from 14 Arnost Grove Raintop Bell.

George: Rather we don’t want those sort of orders, we want orders to Deck Old Glory. When are we going to give Fritz a taste of our British spunk?

Edmund: George, please. No one is more anxious to advance than I am, but until I get these communication problems sorted out, I’m afraid we’re stuck. (phone rings) Captain Blackadder speaking.....no, I’m afraid the line’s very cclllffffhhtttt! (Richards & Elton 1989)

God is a joker. This sets the tone for the world. Humanity is distinguished from the beasts by our ability to laugh and to make others laugh. Dogs do not laugh and cats do not make jokes. We are the funny species. Therefore it is plausible that humankind was conceived in the image of a witty God. Whether this is true or not, it is at least a tantalizing hypothesis. Let us be content to say that God is a heuristic that allows us to better understand the nature of things. But before you get too comfortable, in the warm glow of that tender nostrum, *be warned*—there is nothing simple about understanding. For what we best understand is the salutary by-product of what we most *misunderstand*.

The joke exemplifies this. To make a joke, I forge a horizon of understanding with someone else—and then I smash it to pieces. I engage in the classic hermeneutic act—and then I shred it. I stamp all over it. A joke is misleading. It feigns one meaning then it delivers another, entirely different meaning. A joke is a clever deceit. It leads you on with the promise of one sense—only to ambush you with another sense that makes a non-sense of the first sense. The comic lulls the unwary audience into thinking that ‘order’ means a ‘military command’, and then pounces with a punch line. The pugilist metaphor is telling. Swift and violent body blows accompany the reversal of meaning—we feel it in our gut. Comedy is physical and startling. *Bang*—suddenly it turns out that ‘order’ means a commercial transaction, and not the directive of a general.

Having opened up the delicious gap between ordering curtains and ordering soldiers to their death—*its curtains for you*—the comic then plays merrily with the double meanings of words. The audience is launched on a see-saw between two worlds—civilian and military—as Edmund desperately tries with the only tool at his disposal, savage irony, to avoid the mechanical ballet of death, the miserable hell that was trench warfare during the First World War. Such irony is possible because you and I never quite mean what we say we mean. Nor do we ever—quite—mean what we think we mean. Like all other things, words by nature are double and duplicitous. All communication is misunderstanding—and all truth is a lie. A moralist, I suppose, might be offended by this. But the problem with moralists is that they cannot see that every good act has a down side and that bad acts are sometimes the necessary corollary of good deeds. Oskar Schindler was one of the rare moral personalities in the morally despicable twentieth century. He was that because he lied on a grand scale. If there was ever an act of redemptive communication, it was Schindler’s audacious dramaturgy of lies. He conned the Nazi brass into believing that he had productive slave labor factories so he could save the Jewish workers on his sacred list. When moralists tell you ‘do not lie’, remember Schindler.

This paradox of the liar is well assayed by Bob Dylan when, with the wryness of age, he growls: ‘All the truth in the world adds up to one big lie/ I’m in love with a woman who don’t even appeal to me’ (Dylan 1999). If I pause to think why the pop music of the second half of the twentieth century was so good, I am reminded that it was a glorious mimesis of a hundred, maybe even a thousand, demotic musics that had come before it. When Mick Jagger sings the song about the girl with the ‘Far Away Eyes’ in mock preachy drawling camp gospel country tones, he

manages to self-consciously wink at his audience, slide between American evangelical white and black musics, send up ‘the church of the sacred bleeding heart of Jesus/ Located somewhere in Los Angeles, California’, sing reverential even religious country harmonies about someone who cannot find any harmony in their own life, and turn mawkish country sentiment into a secular hymn of salvation. When life has become disgusting, the girl with the far away eyes will redeem you (Jagger & Richards 1978). Allan Bloom, who wrote a rather good Swiftian satire of American higher education, complained that Jagger was a chameleon (Bloom 1988).¹ But that is exactly what Bloom’s own heroes—Plato and Shakespeare—are. That is their genius. They are, as it has been said of Jagger, a hell of a bunch of interesting characters. You never know which one you will meet at which time on which page.

What makes this possible is the double nature of everything. The art of the chameleon is the nature of art. The nature of art is mimetic. The human species is comic because it can mimic. It can parody, mock, exaggerate, caricature, lampoon, burlesque, spoof, and satirize. All of these are misrepresentations, and misrepresentation lies at the core of the human ability to represent. Even the most faithful representation is a caricature. Thus faith is a comedy and faithfulness is comic because of the double nature of everything. When I was a young man, hermeneutics, linguistic philosophy and various kinds of ordinary language philosophy were all the rage. Earnest discussion of the poly-semantics of words was mandatory. But Lenny Bruce and Groucho Marx could have told the philosophers that everything is poly-semantic—or double-coded—and not just words. Comedy is corporeal, gestural, and physical—and gestures, motions and objects all come with double meanings.

Anything meaningful has a double meaning. This is so because no thing is identical with itself. At the same time, everything has a meaning. *Every* thing has meaning because *any* thing can be funny. Even mass slaughter can be funny—witness *Blackadder*—but it takes remarkable comic ability to make it so. We laugh for various reasons—some of them very serious. The condition of the possibility of laughter, though, is singular. *Any* thing in principle can be funny because *all* things are at a slight tangent to themselves. This is ultimately because the cosmos—or nature—itself is double-coded, or as the quantum physicists put it: a light wave from one observation standpoint is a light particle from another standpoint. It is in this sense that God is joker. God is the name for the gap that separates each thing from itself. Everything that exists—exists in a phase-shift.

All comedy is about doubling. This is true of comedy both in the cosmic and mundane senses. From the lamest stand-up comedian to the sublimity of Shakespeare, at the heart of comedy is the doubling of human identity. Comedy explores the gap between ‘who we are’ and ‘who we are’, or as the wonderful Viola in *Twelfth Night* puts it: ‘*I am not what I am.*’ (*Twelfth Night*, 3.1) ² Indeed so—I am not what I am. All of us lead double lives in a world that is double coded—even if some of us like Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* don’t realize this, and end up as the butt of humor. Great human personalities are aware that they are not what they are. They are self-aware. This does not mean that they do not suffer the burden of their double self. Viola’s self-knowledge is tinged with pathos. Her concealment—the dramaturgical disguise of her own self, her playing the role of a boy—brings her close to her love but at the same time separates her from him—and she knows it. This comic pathos—the pathos of a paradox—redeems Viola from being thought ridiculous or risible. She still gets plenty of laughs—but laughs that are due someone who has a distance from their own self.

The ability to distance one’s self from one’s self is central to both human self-consciousness and human self-understanding. It is the essential—the higher—task of humor. Yet some human beings have difficulty distancing themselves from their own selves. They are unintentionally funny as a result. We laugh *at* them, rather than with them. They are the ones who are least like Viola and most like Malvolio. They are the upwardly mobile amongst us—you know who you are. They are the ones who are wedded without parody to their brilliant careers. These are the souls who not only pretend to be someone whom they are not—there is nothing remarkable in that—but they also pretend not to be pretending. Most absurd of all, they pretend *to themselves* that they are not pretending, and so end up being pretentious prats—the typical fate of all social climbers. They cannot see that life is a game, to be enjoyed.

‘*I am not what I am*’ is a paradox. It is the uncanny truth of those who lead double lives, who are players on the stage of life. All societies have some small aspect of theatricality. All human beings have one foot in nature and one foot in society, and by default play nature off against each other. Yet there are a small number of societies that do this with a special luminous intensity. These are dramaturgical societies. In the modern world, the first of the great dramaturgical societies was Elizabethan England. The great later inheritor of the spirit of Elizabethan England was the United States. Both the Americans and the English faced a singular option in their history—either dramaturgy or civil war. Both chose both. Both allowed their

society to slide into civil war. Both returned from the abyss—and rebuilt themselves as intensely theatrical societies. Both had Puritan and Romantic currents that disavowed dramaturgy in the name of morals and authenticity. Both mastered those currents.

We often think of the United States as a Puritan society. There is an element of truth in this of course. But, in a larger sense, America is the off-shoot of a society that had begun to stage itself, indeed to stage itself comically. Consequently, America is filled with incongruous characters—with epicurean puritans and bourgeois bohemians. In the nineteenth century, the puritan religion and protestant zeal of America turned itself into something very different—viz., evangelical dramaturgy—and, at exactly the same time, America became besotted with Shakespeare. America's evangelical dramaturgy from its start was fiercely musical. In time this musicality mutated from spirituals, hymns and gospel singing into the anti-puritan pleasure-centred headland of rock 'n roll. In the nineteen-sixties, Englishmen like Mick Jagger and Keith Richards imported this soundtrack of unfathomable ambiguity from America—only to export it again, in various, often very knowing, ways back to America. In so doing, these twentieth century artists reprised with an added touch of irony England's earlier export of Shakespeare to America.

Susan Sontag captures something essential about the experience of being *In America* (1999) with her novelization of the life of the nineteenth century Polish emigrant actress Helena Modjeska—whose forte was Shakespearean roles.³ It is no wonder, then, that Tom Stoppard has his wonderful *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) end with Viola heading for the comic-tempest-shore of the New World in the beautiful tracking shot which ends the film. I cannot think of Stoppard's dazzling screen play without also thinking of how close in spirit it is to the tradition of American sociology. This is not an obvious point of comparison I know, but all the more revealing for that. I am struck by the amount of dramaturgical social science that America has produced—most particularly from the nineteen-twenties onwards. I am thinking of figures ranging from George Herbert Mead, Kenneth Burke, Hugh Dalziel Duncan and Erving Goffman to Richard Schechner, Richard Sennett and Jeffrey Alexander. American sociology of the nineteen-sixties was dominated by the mammoth figure of Talcott Parsons. Parsonian sociology was the sociology of social functions and *roles*. The world of roles is the world of Violas. I remember, at the time, there was much snorting about this. Role players are inauthentic, the cry went. Well, *yes*, they are—that is the point. The better actor a role player is, the less important the original self is to the functioning of personality. 'Exactly', the retort came back, 'so my true self is mutilated by the

roles I play'. If *'I am not what I am'*, then I am not being true to my true self. But what self is that exactly—and what exactly is wrong with a doppelganger self?

This question touches on a basic human anxiety. If I play a role, then I do and say things that are not true. If I admit I do that then in some way I seem to be admitting that I am a dirty rotten scoundrel—or, in more flushed terms, I am saying that I am a wicked Machiavellian doing the devil's work. Now most social actors, even the most accomplished social actors, the great communicators, do not want to say this—and there is no reason in any case that we would want to turn those selves into scheming reprobates. Nor do we want a world filled with raving lunatics like Shakespeare's Leontes—for whom *'all's true that is mistrusted'* (*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1). That is simply madness. Still that doesn't stop all the truth in the world adding up to one big lie either. The reason for this is the paradox of the truth teller. There is the ordinary truth of truth claims. *This* is what I am saying—and I am telling the truth. What I am saying is factually accurate, normatively correct, scrupulously honest, and so on. But human beings also lie by telling the truth. In war, the best camouflage is to leave something in plain sight. In politics, candor is a strategy safely conducted because even the most fulsome statement is selective. Every time we reveal something, we also hide it. We do that consciously and we do it unconsciously. We do it cunningly and we do it naively. Courts try and get around this by asking witnesses to speak 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. But that only works to a certain extent—because everything is double coded. Even the most honest person misrepresents what they are trying, with pains, to scrupulously represent. The worst witness is the eye witness.

Different from this merry-go-round is dramaturgical truth. It simply takes for granted that human beings hide things with their candor—and reveal things by communicating them indirectly. Dramaturgical truth is the truth of those who think and behave as if the world is a stage. It is the truth of the unreconstructed Elizabethans and dramaturges among us—those who think that everything important said and done is said and done 'in role' in the sense that the Elizabethan Viola/Cesario played *a role played by a boy playing a girl playing a boy*. When she declared *'I am not what I am'*, she alluded to these multiple identities—and the delicious comic confusion that they create. What is *the truth of a boy playing a girl playing a boy*? It is the truth of a paradox. It is the truth of a virgin queen. It is the truth of the Stoic who when asked 'what is freedom?' replies that 'freedom is the following of necessity'. This answer may seem puzzling and enigmatic on first hearing. It may seem somewhat 'Jekyll and Hyde' to combine two patently

contradictory ideas—those of freedom and necessity—but that is what dramaturgical acts and dramaturgical societies do. They combine male and female, master and servant, old and young, high and low, liberal and conservative, republican and democrat. In a dramaturgical world, boys play girls playing boys—or if you are Tom Stoppard, girls play boys playing girls.

Truth in such a world is not spoken directly. It might not even be spoken at all. It is just as likely to be visual or gestural, historical or geographical as it is verbal or discursive. Dramaturgical truth is not newspaper truth, it is not ideological truth. It is not the truth of a moral or political ‘view point’—God save us from those! Dramaturgical truth is communicated indirectly—via the surreptitious intertwining and oblique overlay of contrary roles, deed and thoughts. It is the truth of pseudonymous works. These are works—as Kierkegaard said of the ones that were attributed to him—where ‘...*there is not a single word which is mine*. I have no opinion about these works except as a third person, no knowledge of their meaning, except as a reader, not the remotest private relation to them [emphasis added]’ (Kierkegaard 1998: 33). Something similar applies to the works of Shakespeare and Plato. Their works do not have an authorial point of view. That is what makes them great works. There are truths in them, but they are contrary paradoxical truths.

It may be easiest to explain the notion of paradoxical or contrary truth with an example. Take the case of humor. There is a kind of lame humorist who thinks herself a critic of society. So she pillories the president or prime minister of the day—whereas a great humorist will not only criticize power but will also criticize those who criticize power. In comedy, it is a truism that ‘nothing is sacred’. Nothing cannot be satirized or sent up. If you can not give offense to all and sundry, including your own tribe, then you are not a very funny person. You confuse smarminess with humorousness—not an uncommon mistake. Yet it is also *not* true that ‘nothing is sacred’ in comedy—it is just that, most often in the comic vein, blasphemy is the best defense of the sacred. It will get you into trouble of course—just ask poor Salman Rushdie. Most true believers do not have a sense of humor—it is what makes them true believers. This malady is not only a function of religion. Militant secular liberals are just as mirthless as dogmatic pious throw-backs. Nothing on earth is more tiresome than earnest professors and semi-lettered journalists who have a ‘point of view’—usually with a sharpened tip that they wish to drive down your throat.

The answer to the self-righteous purveyors of self-certain truth was imparted a long time ago by Socrates: *All I know is that I am ignorant*. Knowledge is not transparent, and interesting

truths are contrary and paradoxical. That is so not least of all of self-knowledge. For no matter what we know, we are always a puzzle to ourselves. Thankfully this is so—for if this was not the case, we would not want to know anything. Misunderstanding ourselves is the necessary condition of understanding ourselves, and we understand ourselves only insofar as we misunderstand ourselves. ‘I am not, therefore I am.’ That is the human condition. It is the human condition because we are a species that makes jokes. Understanding via the act of misunderstanding—crisscrossing the gap between ‘what is’ and ‘what is’, between ‘what I am’ and ‘what I am’—is what it is about ourselves that allows us to wring sense from the world. God is the name of the gap between what is and what is. God is the ‘*I am that I am*’ that is the condition of the possibility of the ‘*I am not what I am*’.

The former is the inverse of the latter. Both are different sides of the same coin. Everything that exists—exists in phase shifts. God, existence, being—you choose the name—is the indivisible common thing that divides itself remorselessly. It is the paradoxical singular that is double. The human condition, like the cosmic condition, is a paradoxical one. What is interesting is not simply that God is a joker but the nature of being—and of being human—that makes such joking possible. A simple term for it is ‘mystery’. A weightier term might be the ‘non identity’ of things with themselves. The great Catholic writer and critic, G.K. Chesterton, seemed to think that God was comical and creation was witty. The reason for this was simple. Religion is concerned with mysteries—much like the detective stories that Chesterton wrote. Mystery is a comic phenomenon. It is what does not make sense and yet at the same time does make sense. This is the limit case of understanding. Mystery and humor share this in common. In both cases, understanding is produced by perplexity.

Religion in this sense is comical. It is comical in the same way that a joke relies on a word meaning one thing and another thing at the same time. The key word in a joke is not what it is. ‘Why are there schedules if trains are always late?’ grumbles the commuter. ‘Because how else would we know that they were late,’ replies his friend. The schedule is both the cause of things being on time and the measure of things running late. It ‘is’ and ‘is otherwise’ at the same time. In a larger sense, mystery ‘is’ and ‘is otherwise’ at the same time. We know from detective stories that mysteries hang on what ‘makes sense’ and ‘doesn’t make sense’ simultaneously. Little oddities, tiny little phase-shifts, lie at the core of mysteries—and cause the observant sleuth to recognize them, and then to solve them. The great fictional detective sees what it is that

everyone else sees in plain sight—and yet concludes that the innocent gesture was in fact a malign one. The kindly old grandmother who puts the teaspoon of sugar in her nephew’s cup was poisoning him. Everything has two meanings, and sometimes these dual meanings are potent antinomies. A mystery is a quantum state of being. At the heart of a mystery—or at least at the heart of an interesting mystery—is a paradox.

Chesterton’s Father Brown appreciated this—and so did Shakespeare, though Shakespeare rarely talks directly about God. There is relatively little overt religion in Shakespeare’s dramas, and yet there is a ton of paradox. Art or Nature replaces the figure of God in Shakespeare, yet Art and Nature have the same paradoxical, enigmatic, quality of Chesterton’s God. An enigma is the product of two contrary warring qualities that are identical—or as Polixenes puts it, so beautifully, in the exchange with Perdita in Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale*, nature is made by art but nature also makes art, making art and nature identical. Art adds to nature, art changes nature—but nature creates art in the first place. Thus art *is* nature.⁴ Two is one. Art-Nature is God. That is Plato’s Pre-Socratic point also—all opposition ends in union. In Hegel’s terms, the Stoic God of Reason divides itself in time wholly and solely with the point of being reunited at the end of time.

Every paradox in the paradox-ridden works of Shakespeare and Chesterton says the same thing. One may talk profusely about God as Chesterton does—or only on tenterhooks as Shakespeare does. It makes no difference. One may suppose that this is so because both Shakespeare and Chesterton experienced religion in *difficult* ways. These difficulties seem to have brought out, in each, a deep sense of paradox. Chesterton was a Catholic convert in an age with little interest in religion. Shakespeare emerged from a Catholic milieu in an age that had far too much interest in religion. Conversion in an agnostic era is a contradiction in terms. Likewise to be ‘Catholic in a Protestant world’ is a contradiction in terms. Both are perfect metaphors for the nature of paradox. Both are instrumental in the making of someone who has a particular kind of self—a dramaturgical self. The dramaturgical self is a person who impersonates their own self. This is a *person* who becomes a *personality* (Heller 1984). This is a self who can say, as Viola does, ‘*I am not what I am*’.

The dramaturgical self inhabits a world of plays, of plays within plays, and of player-kings. But do not make the mistake of thinking that this is thus always a playful world. The dramaturgical self has a knife-edge. As when Henry IV says to Falstaff: ‘*presume not that I am*

the thing that I was' (2 *Henry IV*, 5.5), cutting off all relations with the rotund rogue. A personality is a self that 'presents' itself to the world—that appears in disguise, that feigns its own reality—sometimes in very complex ways. The player-king can slip into disguise and move among the common soldiers—claiming that '*the king is but a man, as I am*' (*Henry V*, 4.1). The paradox of the 'king as commoner' is redoubled later on, when the common soldier, chided by the king, chides his majesty in return: '*Your majesty came not like yourself*' (*Henry V*, 4.8). *So there*—we are peers. But this exchange is not just about power or status. In fact it is mostly about the selfhood of selves in a staged world—selves who do not appear, even to themselves, to be who or what they are.

The luscious, ripe complexities of this mount up when we remember that the public staged world also has an off-stage—and the off-stage characters can be just as elusive as those who are on-stage, even if their elusiveness is played out in different ways. Shakespeare, off-stage, was exactly this kind of elusive self. Despite the hundreds of books written about his life, we know very little for certain about Shakespeare the man. That doesn't stop writers from asserting that he was any and every possible thing—from the culpable pliant tool of the Tudor state to a Catholic old believer secretly conniving against Henry Tudor's mercurial Protestant dynasty. This only means that the biographies written about him are filled to brimming with what 'might have', 'could have', and 'would have' been—which means that his biographers can say more or less whatever they want about him. The results are happy fictions. You can enjoy them—without believing them. They are speculations about a *possible* life.

One of the more interesting of these speculations is that Shakespeare came from a recusant Catholic family. Recusants were Catholics who refused to attend the services of the Church of England. If this is true, it means he grew up in a household that carried on religious rites banned by the English Protestant state. The evidence for this is that (possibly) Shakespeare's mother, Mary, was a distant relation of the prominent Warwickshire Catholic family, the Arden's—and that (possibly) Shakespeare's father, John, lost his mayoral office because of religious non-conformity. Like most of Shakespeare's biography, all of this lies in the realm of 'may be' rather than plain fact. Yet if it is true, it does explain a lot about Shakespeare's drama. Conversely, if it is not true—and it may very well *not* be true—it still, in a manner, if only in an apocryphal manner, *remains* true. For something akin to the paradox of being, seeing or growing

up ‘Catholic in a Protestant world’ shaped the mental world of Shakespeare. If he did not experience this antinomy exactly, he perforce was exposed to something very much like it.

What are important are not the specifics but the structure of the formative experience of a dramaturgical society and a performative self. Being, seeing or growing up ‘Catholic in a Protestant world’ is as good a metaphor as any to illustrate the kind of bifurcated structural experience that gives rise to a dramaturgical world. Shakespeare was not a recusant Catholic. But he either came from a recusant household or (if not) he had neighbors and teachers who were recusant Catholics. Warwickshire and Stratford-on-Avon were Catholic strongholds in an officially Protestant world. Whether this divide was experienced first hand or else observed second hand in childhood—or even a bit of both—such bifurcation is an exemplary formative experience for the ‘actor self’. It sets up a sharp dramatic tension between the social ‘me’ and the existential ‘I’—to put it in George Herbert Mead’s terms. The recusant Catholic lives a double life—not unlike the convert in a disbelieving world. The recusant must adhere to official beliefs in public and confess unofficial beliefs in private. This self is necessarily divided—Catholic in private and Protestant in public. The recusant lives two lives at once. The recusant appears in public in disguise, wearing a mask.

Observing that and mimicking that is great training for an actor—or for the ‘actor self’, the *personality*, who impersonates his own self or her own self, and presents that feigned self in public. Recusants double the meaning of everything they say and do, and in a parallel manner they impersonate their own person. The accomplished ‘actor self’ in turn learns to *impersonate the impersonator*. In doing so, the actor learns to do by volition what, for another person, is a matter of necessity. The actor thus turns nature into art. The actor does ironically, wittily, comically, and mimetically what others do by way of sufferance. Neither party can do otherwise.

The ‘actor’ self, the master of the ‘presentation of self’ in public, acquires in this manner an unusual sensitivity to the dual track of meaning. On this dual track, what makes sense is also a kind of nonsense—or rather nonsense is the bridge between two contrary senses. Wit and comedy function as the hyphen between dramatic polarities—the rapid-fire switch between ‘I am’ and ‘I am’. The gifted child immersed in a divided world, where the double meaning of everything has been magnified and is highly charged, acquires a reflex-like capacity to produce paradoxical thoughts and contrasting concepts with astonishing speed. At the top of the scale, one ends up like Shakespeare, who learns to dramatize all worldviews and all concepts. This does not mean

that there is a procession of cut-out ‘Catholic’ or ‘Protestant’, ‘Puritan’ or ‘Pagan’ characters in his plays—like some medieval pageant. On the contrary, what he creates are *individuals* composed of the delicate cross-cutting and allusive interweaving of meanings—characters who are in some measure not ever what they are. These are characters possessed of unutterable depth—adroit blends of incongruous universals become immortal and immaculate particulars.

The process of impersonation of the impersonator—and the underlying drive toward the impersonal that this represents—has one further interesting effect that is worth noting. Let us call this the ‘feedback effect on the self’. The ‘actor self’ impersonates. The ‘actor self’ plays roles. As these roles multiply, the ‘original self’ or person of the actor shrinks. The ‘original self’ or person—the first ‘who I am’—becomes a minimal self. The minimal self is a peg on which roles are hung. The smaller the ‘original self’ becomes, the larger are the number of roles which can be performed—and the greater is the repertoire of impersonation. The smaller the ‘original self’, the less there exists a self in the traditional biographical sense. The ‘impersonating self’ does things that are recorded. Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays. He had a highly productive artistic life. But in proportion to the expansion of the feigned self of the artist who imagines or performs an astonishing array of characters, the biographical self diminishes. In a biographer’s sense, ‘William Shakespeare husband of Anne Hathaway’ hardly exists. His life was not filled with high drama. He is not a very interesting biographical subject—in spite of the number of biographies written about him. The reason for this is that his real self was a thin self. This is true of great artists who, as their admirers often glumly report, are disappointing to meet in the flesh.

As persons, they are not interesting. For what they are interested in is *work*, the act of creation, and into that goes their personality. In the same vein, it is often remarked that it is virtually impossible to figure out what Shakespeare thought about politics or religion—or any of the other big-ticket items that make for interesting life stories. In contrast, what we mainly remember about Christopher Marlowe are not his plays but his life—that he was knifed and murdered by an associate in the Elizabethan secret service. What we remember—indeed what *posterity* chose to remember, or cared to remember—about Shakespeare are the characters and lines he created. What resonates is his work, not his life.

The ‘Catholic in a Protestant world’ kept his cards very close to his chest. Just as anyone who is a conservative and who works in today’s liberal university must do. Puritans—then and now—are unforgiving. But that is to the benefit of art. For the most interesting artists—like the

most interesting personalities in life—communicate indirectly. They listen patiently to the prattle of their peers—and then say or do, act or react, dramaturgically, adopting masks and speaking ironically. They communicate indirectly through characters and roles. The kinds of speculations that get the contemporary heart racing—that Shakespeare was bisexual and so on—miss the point. If his work is androgynous—if he writes male and female, high and low, comic and tragic parts equally well—it is not because he had a racy life but because he did not. He was the consummate dramaturge because he learnt to disguise his own self. He learnt to be what he was not—to blank his original self or minimize it.

Pick your sexual metaphor—androgynous, hermaphrodite, or bisexual. What is being described is simply the double life of the human self. Shakespeare in another life might have turned to the excitements of the secret service to play out this double life, but in the life he had, he didn't. We catch glimpses of his original self in his work. He doesn't like lawyers—that is pretty obvious.⁵ But then who does? This is a rare glimpse of his first self, a glimmer that shines through his enormous capacity to be what he is not. '*To be not to be*'—the inverse of the '*I am that I am*'—is the genius of dramaturgy. It is the ability to become expert in appearances and disguises, to excel as the ambidextrous soul, the one who plays the role of daughter and son equally well—master of double coding, mistress of metaphor and analogy, servant of contrast and handmaiden of simile, king of playacting and queen of role making, the one who never speaks directly, but who only ever speaks through parts, characters, figures, and masks: Plato and Kierkegaard in one.

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Notes

¹ Of Jagger, Bloom wrote: 'In his act he was male and female, heterosexual and homosexual; unencumbered by modesty, he could enter everyone's dreams, promising to do everything with everyone...' (1988: 78).

² Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, 3.1

Olivia Stay:

I prithee, tell me what thou thinkest of me.

Viola That you do think you are not what you are.

Olivia If I think so, I think the same of you.

Viola Then think you right: I am not what I am.

Olivia I would you were as I would have you be!

Viola Would it be better, madam, than I am?

I wish it might, for now I am your fool.

³ Pronounced 'Mod-zhe-yev-ska'.

⁴ Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, 3.4.

Perdita For I have heard it said

There is an art which in their piedness shares

With great creating nature.

Polixenes Say there be;

Yet nature is made better by no mean

But nature makes that mean: so, over that art

Which you say adds to nature, is an art

That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry

A gentler scion to the wildest stock,

And make conceive a bark of baser kind

By bud of nobler race: this is an art

Which does mend nature, change it rather, but

The art itself is nature.

Perdita So it is.

⁵ Most memorably of all, the rabble-rousing line from Dick, the crony of Jack Cade: 'The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers' (2 *Henry VI*, 4.II).