

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

# ‘Trafficking with Merchants for His Soul’: Dante Gabriel Rossetti Among the Aesthetes

JOSEPHINE M. GUY

THE QUOTATION IN MY TITLE comes from Oscar Wilde, and is taken from a review he published in 1887 of a biography of Rossetti by Joseph Knight. My concern, then, is not with Rossetti himself, but with what was made of him by a later generation of writers, particularly those associated with the Aesthetic Movement. Even as early as the 1880s the origins of this Movement had been traced back to the Pre-Raphaelites, and it is therefore fitting that for Wilde and fellow-Aesthetes such as Walter Pater, Rossetti should have come to exemplify artistic authenticity, both in terms of the life he lived, as well as the way in which way he wrote and painted. Serendipitously, that link between Rossetti and the Aesthetes can be most easily seen via Thomas Chatterton, whose name is celebrated in this lecture series. We can see the significance of Chatterton to this relationship in an unfortunate mistake made by Wilde’s best known biographer, Richard Ellmann.

In the Clark Library in the University of California at Los Angeles there is an unpublished manuscript by Wilde of a lecture on Chatterton which Wilde delivered at Birkbeck College, London, on a foggy night in December 1886. In fact, the term ‘manuscript’ is a less than precise description of this document—but I’ll come back to this point in due course. Interestingly, the lecture ends with a sonnet on Chatterton which Ellmann attributed to Wilde and which he interpreted in the light of

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details of Wilde's biography, so much so that Ellmann assumed a close correspondence between the lives of the two men: 'Wilde', Ellmann suggested, 'could share with Chatterton . . . a sense that he might one day be his own victim, a sacrifice to himself.'<sup>1</sup> Unhappily for Ellmann, however, the sonnet (as Roger C. Lewis has pointed out) was not by Wilde at all, but by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It had been written in 1880 and published in Rossetti's 1881 collection of poems, *Ballads and Sonnets*.<sup>2</sup> Wilde was a great admirer of Rossetti's verse, and it is not surprising that he should have borrowed Rossetti's lines for his talk. That said, the admiration was certainly not a mutual one: on receiving as a gift a volume of Wilde's own *Poems* (which were also published in 1881), Rossetti had written to Jane Morris that they were 'trash', and that anyone who admired them had 'gone drivelling'.<sup>3</sup> Ellmann's misattribution would surely have had Rossetti not just turning, but spinning in his grave.

Rossetti's disparaging attitude towards Wilde reminds us that his appropriation by the Aesthetes, which followed his death in 1882, involved a significant element of re-definition: the Rossetti celebrated by Wilde did not necessarily correspond to the way in which Rossetti had seen himself. Put another way, Rossetti's poetics were of a different order from those advanced on his behalf by Wilde. Interestingly, it is Rossetti's and Wilde's mutual regard for Chatterton which allows us to see their different views about poetic value, as well as the reasons why those values came about. What, then, did Chatterton represent for Rossetti and Wilde? And what kind of poetic sensibility was he held to exemplify?

We can gain some purchase on these questions by looking at Chatterton's wider reputation in the late nineteenth century. In the 1860s and 1870s a whole series of new works on Chatterton (many biographical in nature) had suddenly appeared.<sup>4</sup> The most important was almost certainly that of W. W. Skeat, that doyen of nineteenth-century philologists. In 1871 he published a new edition of Chatterton's work, in which he modernised the

<sup>1</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (1987), p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Roger C. Lewis, 'A Misattribution: Oscar Wilde's "Unpublished Sonnet on Chatterton"', *Victorian Poetry*, 26 (1990), 164–9.

<sup>3</sup> *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence*, eds. John Bryson and Janet Camp Troxell (Oxford, 1976), p. 152; quoted in Lewis, 'A Misattribution', p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> These included: James R. Bennett, *The Life of Thomas Chatterton* (1860); Stephen N. Elrington, *The Life and Character of Thomas Chatterton* (1864); Henry J. Jennings, *Thomas Chatterton: The Boy Poet of Bristol* (1868); Daniel Wilson, *Chatterton: A Biographical Study* (1869); and David Masson, *Chatterton: A Story of the Year 1770* (1874).

spelling of the Rowley poems—those works which Chatterton had attempted to pass off as having been written by a fifteenth-century monk. Skeat's volume, which was reissued several times before the end of the century, marked a move away from a fascination with Chatterton as a forger to the possibility of appreciating him as a poet in his own right and with his own name.<sup>5</sup> Confirmation of this reassessment can be found in the fact that Rossetti's friend, Theodore Watts-Dunton, was commissioned to prepare texts of some of Chatterton's poems for inclusion in volume three of the distinguished Victorian series, *Ward's English Poets*. Rossetti's interest in Chatterton seems to have stemmed from this collaborative work, and his sonnet had originally been written for inclusion in an article by Watts-Dunton (although it never appeared there).<sup>6</sup> Taken together, this critical and editorial work suggests a widely felt ambition from the late 1860s to the early 1880s to assimilate Chatterton into a canon of English poetry; indeed Rossetti's sonnet attempts to do just this—he compares Chatterton to Milton and Shakespeare, and locates his poetry in what he improbably terms the 'dear new bower of England's art'. On the other hand, the sudden flood of biographical studies also testifies to a growing interest in Chatterton as some form of newly found cultural icon. In 1884, the playwright Henry Arthur Jones collaborated with H. A. Herman to produce a one-act drama, *Chatterton*. It was given a single performance at the Princess's Theatre on the afternoon of 22 May, with Wilson Barrett, a leading contemporary character-actor, in the title role. Reviews of the play were generally very favourable, with Barrett's performance winning particular praise.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> W. W. Skeat, ed., *The Poetical Works of Thomas Chatterton. With an Essay on the Rowley Poems* (1871). Skeat's volume was re-issued in 1875 (as part of the Aldine Editions of British Poets), in 1883, and in 1891. It provoked a rejoinder by Harry Buxton Forman; his article 'Thomas Chatterton and His Latest Editor' first appeared in the Jan. 1874 issue of the *London Quarterly Review*, and was reprinted privately as a separate pamphlet later that year.

<sup>6</sup> Volume three of *Ward's English Poets* appeared in 1880; as Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl observe, correspondence between Rossetti and Watts-Dunton demonstrates that Watts-Dunton was 'deeply indebted' to Rossetti both for the material for his introduction and for the selection of particular poems. Interestingly, Rossetti took issue with Skeat's editing; he restored some of the archaisms in order to 'give colour' to the poems, and boasted to Watts-Dunton that his choices of variants were 'better' than those made by Skeat. (*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, eds. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 4 (Oxford, 1967), pp. 1766–74.) It is not wholly clear why Rossetti's sonnet did not appear in Watts-Dunton's article; Lewis quotes a letter from Rossetti to Watts-Dunton which suggests that Rossetti may have had reservations about his poem's value (Lewis, 'A Misattribution', p. 166). The work appeared in *Ballads and Sonnets* alongside sonnets on Keats, Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley.

<sup>7</sup> A brief account of the performance is given in Doris Arthur Jones, *The Life and Letters of Henry Arthur Jones* (1930), pp. 88–9.

Jones's and Herman's interest in Chatterton clearly centred on the dramatic potential suggested by his extraordinary and brief life. Rossetti's admiration, by contrast, focused on an appreciation of what he saw as Chatterton's technical 'versatility'—a judgement which in turn was almost certainly prompted by the fact that, as I have said, Rossetti first encountered Chatterton via editorial work on his texts.<sup>8</sup> But Rossetti also admired Chatterton as a representative of what he termed 'the true day-spring of modern romantic poetry'. This judgement was quoted by Thomas Hall Caine, another friend of Rossetti, who also published a tribute to him on his death.<sup>9</sup> As Roger Lewis has pointed out, Wilde knew Hall Caine's book, and the quotation Hall Caine attributed to Rossetti almost certainly prompted Wilde's own parallel judgement that Chatterton was what he termed the 'founder of *our* romantic school'.<sup>10</sup> Wilde's stronger sense of ownership and identity here is significant: Chatterton is part of *our* school rather than Rossetti's *modern* school. It implies a very particular interpretation of Romanticism, one which could be affiliated to a certain contemporary poetics—a poetics, that is, associated with Oscar Wilde himself and with the values of the Aesthetes. It turns out, then, that the Romantic type which Wilde has in mind is not that type described by Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—the poet of 'low and rustic life[,] . . . a man speaking to men'.<sup>11</sup> Chatterton, according to Wilde, is the very 'opposite' of Wordsworth. The Romantic poet Chatterton most closely resembles is the alienated Keatsian outsider. 'The youngest of the Martyrs here is Iain, / Fair as Sebastian and as early slain'—this is how Wilde characterised Keats in a youthful sonnet.<sup>12</sup> The sentiment

<sup>8</sup> *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 4, p. 1774.

<sup>9</sup> It is not wholly clear what Rossetti meant by this phrase. He may have had in mind an idea of Chatterton as something of a revolutionary, for he described Chatterton's 'excellent' poem, *Prophecy*, as 'radical in spirit'. (Ibid., p. 1767). Hall Caine's tribute to Rossetti, published in 1882, was titled *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, 'A Misattribution', p. 166. The source of the Wilde quotation is Hesketh Pearson, *The Life of Oscar Wilde* (Westport, Connecticut, 1978), p. 281. Frustratingly Pearson's book relies heavily on anecdote and contains very little documentation of sources. Consequently his evidence cannot always be relied upon. On this occasion, however, the fact that Wilde's idea of Chatterton as romantic also occurs several times in the lecture lends considerable credibility to the reported comment.

<sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, in William Wordsworth, *The Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 1984), pp. 597, 603.

<sup>12</sup> Entitled 'Keats' Grave', the sonnet was first published in 1877 and reprinted in *Poems* (1881); an early version of the poem, quoted in a letter to Lord Houghton dated June 1877, has the variant 'fouly slain' (*Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (1962), p. 42).

which Wilde describes is very similar indeed to the 'noble Chatterton' of Rossetti's sonnet who, 'At Death's sole door . . . stooped, and craved a dart'. Chatterton the martyr becomes for Wilde the model for what W. B. Yeats would later call the '*last* Romantics': that 'tragic generation' who walked the 'high wire' in the service of their art.

As well as celebrating Chatterton as 'our romantic', Wilde also followed Rossetti in highlighting Chatterton's technical virtuosity. However, he had in mind a rather different notion of the relationship between technique and artistic success. 'What seems technical', Wilde explains in his Chatterton lecture, 'is usually spiritual.' He goes on: '[a]ll great artists have personality as well as perfection in their manner.'<sup>13</sup> Wilde's argument was that technical skill alone is not the mark of genius because technique is always in some sense borrowed—in fact 'stolen' is Wilde's word, an ironic term for him to use in relation to the work of a forger. According to Wilde, genius resides in something unique: what he terms 'personality'.<sup>14</sup>

This term 'personality' appears in an unpublished set of manuscript notes which Wilde made for what appears to be a review of the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and which almost certainly dates from the early 1880s—that is, from around the same time as Wilde was putting together his Chatterton lecture.<sup>15</sup> The review may have been prompted by William Michael Rossetti's two-volume edition of his brother Dante's *Complete Works* which appeared in the summer of 1886. In Wilde's manuscript notes we again find a reference to 'the strength and splendour of [Rossetti's] dominant personality'. Elsewhere in the manuscript, Rossetti is defined as 'splendid because unattainable'; he is an example of what Wilde calls 'that perfect indivisible individuality which is genius itself'. Importantly, for Wilde, this enigmatic quality of Rossetti's personality is evident in his poetry. Wilde comments on the paradox of 'the passions

<sup>13</sup> The 70 page manuscript of Wilde's Chatterton lecture is held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Wilde W672M3. E78. [1886?]); it is not paginated. I am grateful to Merlin Holland for permission to quote from this unpublished manuscript.

<sup>14</sup> Interesting evidence for the difference between Wilde's and Rossetti's appreciation of textual details can also be found in the 'twenty-one variants' which Lewis documents by collating Wilde's transcription with the original in *Ballads and Sonnets* (1881). See Lewis, 'A Misattribution', p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> The five-page autograph manuscript for Wilde's draft review of Rossetti's poetry is also held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles (Wilde W6721M3. D758. [188-?]). It consists only of scattered observations interspersed with quotations from Rossetti's verse; there is no argument or plan. Once again I am grateful to Merlin Holland for permission to quote from this unpublished manuscript.

which [the poems] reveal and so by revelation make mysterious'; and this sense of mystery in turn produces what Wilde terms Rossetti's 'sacramental view of life'. Finally there is a reference to Rossetti as a 'great leader of the romantic school'. Taken together Wilde's comments describe Rossetti in terms very similar to his characterisation of Chatterton, and later, in *De Profundis*—his prison letter—of Christ: like Christ, Rossetti is the Romantic outsider whose genius resides in the particular qualities of a unique and inscrutable personality. Furthermore, this characterisation of Rossetti is in its turn virtually indistinguishable from that made by another Aesthete—Wilde's Oxford mentor, Walter Pater. In 1883 Pater wrote an introduction to a selection of Rossetti's work to be included—once again—in *Ward's English Poets*; there he described Rossetti as a poet whose work was 'always personal and even recondite', and who therefore appealed only 'to a special and limited audience'. Pater went on to explain that the 'gravity' of Rossetti's work resided in his possession of a 'sustained impressibility towards the mysterious conditions of man's everyday life, towards the very mystery itself in it'.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that Wilde never published either his Chatterton lecture, nor his planned review of Rossetti's poetry. It is possible that the review was never finished, or that it was simply not original enough; Wilde's manuscript notes are only jottings, and do little more than rewrite Pater's judgements with the addition of appropriate quotations from Rossetti's poetry. By contrast, there is evidence that the lecture was to have been published. It was advertised to appear in the January 1887 edition of the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, an arts and crafts magazine edited by Wilde's friend, Herbert Horne, who was also an admirer of Chatterton.<sup>17</sup> The most likely reason for the non-appearance of Wilde's piece was, once again, a lack of originality. Ironically, and like the work of Chatterton himself, it turns out that Wilde's lecture was a fake—that is, its actual and alleged authors were quite different from each other. The manuscript at the Clark Library is largely composed of passages physically cut out from the pages of what were then the two most recent biographies of Chatterton: Daniel Wilson's *Chatterton: A Biography* (published in 1869) and David Masson's *Chatterton: A Story of the Year*

<sup>16</sup> The essay was reprinted in *Appreciations* (1889; Library edn., 1910), pp. 205, 207, 211.

<sup>17</sup> The Oct. 1886 issue of the magazine announced that Wilde's essay had been unavoidably postponed until Jan. 1887. Herbert Horne had been organising a campaign to try to raise funds for a memorial plaque to Chatterton at his old school in Bristol; it was unsuccessful. (*Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 188.)

1770 (which appeared in 1874). The cut passages are pasted on to folio sheets with the occasional linking sentence and paragraph by Wilde. We can only assume that in performing his lecture—to an audience of 800, he reported—Wilde hoped, by the exercise of his own ‘dominant personality’, to claim Wilson’s and Masson’s texts as his own. Such blatant theft, could not, of course, have been passed off in print. This linkage between faking, plagiarism, and attempting to transform these activities through performance, is an issue I want to return to. For now, though, I want to move on to the piece on Rossetti which Wilde did publish, the review of Joseph Knight’s book, which I mentioned earlier.

In that 1887 review, we again find Wilde dwelling on the idea of Rossetti as what he terms ‘a great personality’. However, he also introduces a new thought: Rossetti’s personality is such that it does ‘not easily survive shilling primers’—in Wilde’s words, those ‘cheap editions of a great man’ which he is reviewing. The aim of Wilde’s sardonic review is to attack attempts by ‘second-rate’ critics, of whom Joseph Knight is the epitome, to ‘understand’ Rossetti’s work by bringing to bear on his poetry mundane facts from the biography. Examples of such facts, Wilde disparagingly notes, are that Rossetti had ‘a great affection for a dog called “Dizzy”, or that “sloshy” was one of his favourite words of contempt’. According to Wilde this obsession with accumulating biographical detail is misplaced, partly because a concern with biography ‘rob[s] life of much of its dignity and terror’; and partly because Rossetti himself—Wilde claims—was totally unsuited to such treatment. Rossetti, Wilde says, ‘lived apart from the gossip and tittle-tattle of a shallow age’. More pertinently, Rossetti ‘never trafficked with the merchants for his soul, nor brought his wares into the market-place for the idle to gape at’.<sup>18</sup>

This last is Wilde’s most important point, for he is implying that real artistic creativity exists in opposition to the values of commerce and the market. And this is because the market is totally unable to value the ‘invisible individuality’—the special and mysterious quality of personality—which Wilde sees as defining genius. Wilde had expressed a sentiment very similar to this in another sonnet, yet again on his favourite Romantic poet, Keats. First published in January 1886, it had been written in

<sup>18</sup> ‘A Cheap Edition of a Great Man’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, XLV, 6890 (18 Apr. 1887), 5; like most of Wilde’s journalism, the review was published anonymously. It is reprinted in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross, 13 (1909; reprinted, 1993), pp. 148–53.

response to the sale by auction of some of Keats's love letters. It describes how:

... the brawlers of the auction mart  
 Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note.  
 Ay! for each separate pulse of passion quote  
 The merchant's price: I think they love not art,  
 Who break the crystal of a poet's heart  
 That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat!<sup>19</sup>

These lines encapsulate perfectly the ideas motivating Wilde's defence of Rossetti: there is the notion that market evaluations are a form of defilement of the true artist; and the idea that the public's appetite for biographical details, which fuels that market, is degrading, both for them and for the poet concerned. Exactly these sentiments, and exactly these lines from the sonnet on Keats—quoted from memory—appear about a decade later in *De Profundis*, where Wilde describes his outrage at the way in which facts about his own life were being traded by Lord Alfred Douglas. More particularly, he was angry that Douglas wanted to publish extracts from private letters for what Wilde referred to as 'the jaded *décadent* to wonder at, for the greedy *feuilletoniste* to chronicle' and 'for the little lions of the *Quartier Latin* to gape and mouth at'.<sup>20</sup> What is interesting here is the way in which Wilde reduces the 'brawlers of the mart' to their gaze; importantly, it is a gaze which is devouring but at the same time profoundly vacant because ignorant. 'Gape', 'glare', 'gloat' and 'mouth'—these are Wilde's terms, and they conjure up a wholly new kind of purchaser of art: in these verbs, we recognise the voracious but indiscriminating acquisitiveness of the modern consumer. I am suggesting, then, that Wilde's sonnet on the sale of Keats' love letters together with his review of Knight's book on Rossetti invoke, but try to resist, a process which we would today call the commodification of culture. That is to say, the crisis in poetic value which Wilde observes through Rossetti turns on the ways in which art and the artist—in this case, Rossetti and his poetry—are being reduced in the market-place to product, to a commodity.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 182. Hart-Davis notes that the manuscript of Wilde's poem is dated 1 Mar. 1885—that is, one day before the Sotheby's sale of Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne. Wilde had sent William Sharp a copy of his poem for inclusion in *Sonnets of This Century*, a collection edited by Sharp and published in Jan. 1886; the poem also appeared in the *Dramatic Review*, II, 52 (23 Jan. 1886), 249.

<sup>20</sup> *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 455.



The idea that the values of art and the values of commerce or the market are antithetical was not in itself a particularly new one; eighteenth-century poets, such as Alexander Pope, had also laboured the distinction.<sup>21</sup> However, it was given new force in the late nineteenth century by the advent of mass markets for literature, and with those mass markets, the enfranchising of new forms of mass taste. These changes in turn had been brought about by a combination of technological advances in printing, the historically low cost of paper, improved levels of literacy, and general increases in both leisure and disposable incomes. Contemporary critics responded very ambivalently to what Edmund Gosse called 'the influence of democracy in literature'; they feared what (in modern terms) we would call a 'dumbing-down' of literary value.<sup>22</sup> Writers such as Joseph Conrad referred to these new sorts of readers as the 'beastly bourgeois'; Algernon Charles Swinburne dismissed them with the condescending phrase 'ready readers'.<sup>23</sup> Importantly, poets were seen to have a particular reason to feel threatened, for mass taste had fuelled a demand for prose and drama rather than for poetry. The Irish poet, and friend of Yeats, Katharine Tynan, put matters in a nutshell when she wrote in the *Irish Daily Independent* that the 1890s was 'an age as stony to poetry as the ages of Chatterton and Richard Savage'.<sup>24</sup> Tynan's words were reproduced in advertising material for the Bodley Head, a small publishing firm which built a reputation for printing limited editions of poets with an appeal only to minority tastes. It is interesting that once more Tynan invokes Chatterton as the type of poetic neglect: perhaps she was remembering Rossetti's sonnet; she may even have heard about Wilde's 1886 lecture.

Yet, if we think for a moment, the opposition between the tragic Chatterton and the values of the market-place is not an immediately

<sup>21</sup> Two recent but rather different accounts of the relationship between the values of art and of the market in the 18th century are provided by Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and The Market* (New York, 1994) and Colin Nicholson, *Writing and the Rise of Finance* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Edmund Gosse, 'The Influence of Democracy on Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 59 (Apr. 1891), 523–36.

<sup>23</sup> Swinburne's disparagement of the ready reader appears in his digression on obscurity and the poetry of Robert Browning in *George Chapman* (1875); the piece is reprinted in Clyde K. Hyder, ed., *Swinburne as Critic* (1972), pp. 156–63. Conrad's reference to the 'beastly bourgeois' appears in a letter, quoted in Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice: 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> My source for this quotation, and its origins, is James G. Nelson, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 84.

obvious one. Chatterton was, after all, a forger: and as a forger, he could not help but be deeply implicated in market values. The notion of a private forgery, one which is never tested in a market, makes no sense—private forgery is only copying or imitation. Forgery proper requires that some value is being faked, and that someone (usually the buyer) is being gulled. Put simply, it is the selling of a forged work which defines the activity of forgery as criminal. Tynan's suggestion that Chatterton's own age failed properly to appreciate his art takes for granted the case which, a decade earlier, Wilde (following Rossetti) had to argue for. It is worth returning briefly to that argument to remind ourselves of how it worked.

Wilde's lecture on Chatterton was, as I said, a patchwork of material taken from two biographies of him. At first glance, this attention to the facts of Chatterton's biography, to the extent of plagiarising them, may seem to be explained by Wilde's sense of audience: he could not have been unaware that much of the recent popular interest in Chatterton had centred on details of the life. On the other hand, attending to biography does seem to run exactly counter to Wilde's insistence that what is valuable in an artist is personality. But Wilde's argument, as in his review of Rossetti, is that personality and biography are quite distinct, in the sense that knowledge of biographical facts bears no relation to an appreciation of personality. If anything, biography is a distraction, for it erases the mystery of personality, and thereby obscures rather than reveals the artist. Furthermore, biography and the appreciation of personality represent two quite different *forms* of knowledge. The biographer is enslaved by what Wilde later termed the 'monstrous worship of facts';<sup>25</sup> by contrast, the reader of poetry, who discovers the poet's personality through an appreciation of 'his song', is motivated by more spiritual and imaginative insights. Wilde applies this argument to Chatterton in order to revalue the apparently damning facts of the biography. Wilde's aim is to turn practices which the market-place identified as criminal into something whose worth exists beyond the realm of market evaluations. He wants, that is, to revalue forgery as 'art'—as what he terms 'a brilliant if somewhat daring act of imagination' by a 'visionary dreamer'. Perversely, Wilde claims that forgery (which was, and is, a crime) can actually be a marker in poetry of its very opposite: of artistic honesty and authenticity. It is evidence of a desire for what he terms 'artistic self-effacement'.

<sup>25</sup> Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (1891); reprinted in *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross, 8, p. 10.

Chatterton, Wilde argues, was a 'pure artist' because 'his aim was not to reveal himself but to give pleasure'.

Here we see in another form the distinction between biography and personality: the personality of Chatterton, which is expressed through his poetry, and which is revealed only through an aesthetic judgement, has little relation to biographical details, that is to the man who is a forger. More pertinently, however, it is precisely the man, as opposed to the poet—that is, Chatterton as forger, Keats as lover of Fanny Brawne, Rossetti as recluse who raided his wife's grave to recover his poems, or (we might be tempted to add) Wilde as homosexual—it is these biographies which interest the 'brawlers of the auction mart' and the 'mob of magazine hacks'. By turning the forger and criminal into an artist of the very purest kind, Wilde was attempting to rescue poetry from the corrupted tastes of those consumers who always conflate the poetry with the man, and who were therefore constitutionally unable to appreciate that priceless aesthetic phenomenon which is personality. Wilde used exactly this distinction later in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, when he has Lord Darlington utter the aphorism that it is only the 'cynic . . . who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing'. We might also note in passing how prescient Wilde's distinction seems in relation to modern treatments of his own life and work. I can think of no better example of this conflation of the artist with the man than Brian Gilbert's 1997 film *Wilde*. That film advertised itself by appealing explicitly to a prurient interest in the details of Wilde's sexual life—by tantalising the viewer with artful shots of the bare bodies of Stephen Fry and Jude Law. On this occasion, it is Wilde who would be turning in his grave. Unhappily this treatment of an artist is not exceptional in the late twentieth century. We can find an equally good example of the modern consumer's appetite for the man, as much as the poetry, in the relish with which the media has traded on the details of the private life of the late Ted Hughes.

To return to the nineteenth century. Chatterton probably appealed to Wilde precisely because he provided such a 'hard' case for his theory of creativity, and Wilde did love to overturn his audience's expectations. Three years later (in 1889) he would test his theory with a much more outrageous subject, the infamous Victorian poisoner and artist, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright. He too was revalued because of what Wilde termed the 'strong personality to his style'—a quality which Wilde detected both in his painting and in his poisoning.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, and with

<sup>26</sup> Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison', in *Intentions* (1891); reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 92.

a certain ironic consistency, Wilde had once again ‘borrowed’ this idea from someone else; Swinburne, another early Aesthete, had also described Wainewright as ‘admirable alike as a painter, a writer, a murderer’.<sup>27</sup> If Wilde had chosen only these extreme examples—a forger and a poisoner—we might dismiss his argument about artistic personality as mere playfulness: as a lecturer’s ‘turn’ or a critic’s posturing. But the fact that Wilde included Rossetti, one of his favourite poets, within the same frame of argument suggests, I think, a seriousness behind the witty banter.<sup>28</sup> The taint of scandal which had surrounded the last years of Rossetti’s life—locked away as he had been in his Cheyne Walk home with only chloral and Hall Caine for company—these circumstances may have touched Wilde’s sensitivities about his *own* vulnerability in a culture which was developing an insatiable appetite for what Allon White called ‘symptomatic reading’—that is, viewing literary works as crudely expressive of, and thus giving unmediated access to, the emotional life of their authors.<sup>29</sup> It is perhaps relevant here to recall that 1886—the year of the Chatterton lecture—was also the year when Wilde met, and (if Richard Ellmann is correct) Wilde was ‘seduced’ by, his first homosexual lover, Robert Ross.<sup>30</sup>

There may, then, have been a strong personal element in the way in which Wilde, and fellow Aesthetes like Pater, settled on Rossetti, with his reclusive habits, as the exemplum of a new kind of poetic sensibility, one in which the value of verse resides in a quality of concealment, rather than revelation. As Wilde would put it, true poetry expressed not the man, but the personality; not life, but its mystery. That said, there was of course one very obvious and profound limitation to this line of argument, and it is one which Wilde himself could not possibly have been unaware of. In attempting to isolate the poet from the taint of commercial values, he or she had to become mysterious to the point of being totally obscure, and thus ran the risk of being largely unread. The precious, esoteric,

<sup>27</sup> The connection between Wilde and Swinburne is noted by Lawrence Danson who shows how Wilde’s conceit was developed from a digression on Wainewright in Swinburne’s *William Blake: A Critical Essay* (1866); see Danson, *Wilde’s Intentions: An Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 93–4.

<sup>28</sup> William Michael Rossetti’s 1895 edition of Dante Gabriel’s *Family Letters* was one of the books which Wilde asked to be sent to him when he was in prison; ironically, though, Wilde found them disappointing, and complained wittily to Robert Ross that they were ‘obviously forgeries by his brother’ (*Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 423, 520.)

<sup>29</sup> Allon White, *The Uses of Obscurity* (1981).

<sup>30</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 259.

mysterious kind of poetry which Wilde seemed to value ironically had the consequence of confirming exactly the marginal status of poetry which had been lamented by Katharine Tynan—that poets had been reduced to writing for a tiny coterie.

I observed earlier that Rossetti would almost certainly not have recognised either himself, or his verse, in the portrait which Wilde drew of him. Certainly, he would have found incomprehensible Wilde's suggestion that he cared nothing for the sales of his work—that he never 'brought his wares into the market-place'. In fact, Rossetti was very sensitive indeed about the numbers of books and paintings he sold; just as he was morbidly sensitive about his reputation among critics.<sup>31</sup> In his correspondence he frequently conflates monetary with aesthetic value—that is, Rossetti acknowledges, pragmatically, that literary prestige is of limited worth in the absence of strong sales. In a letter written near the end of his life, in March 1881, Rossetti explained how he consoled himself during moments of depression:

I shall not sink, I trust, so long as the poetic life wells up in me at intervals . . . and so long as my painting still interests me and still staves off the horror (against which I am not proof) of inability to meet indebtedness. . . . I am surprised to hear that you think my poetry is read in America. I certainly got £1. 15s. 0½d. now and then from my publisher there, and better than that, the only thoroughly good review ever written of my things was in an American magazine.<sup>32</sup>

In a further letter, written just a few months later in November, he reported in great delight to his mother that 'twelve hundred of the *Ballads and Sonnets* are already sold—this is a great success.'<sup>33</sup> The volume ran to four further editions in less than two years.

For Wilde, however, matters could not have been more different. His volume, *Poems*, which had also appeared in 1881, had sold only poorly. His publisher, David Bogue, had had to resort to an old trick of dividing

<sup>31</sup> Rossetti was so nervous about adverse criticism of *Ballads and Sonnets* that he wrote to his brother requesting that only the 'gratifying' reviews should be forwarded to him. He was also not above log-rolling, referring friends and acquaintances to a laudatory unsigned review which had appeared in the *Athenaeum*. It was in fact by Watts-Dunton, and had been partly orchestrated by Rossetti. To Watts-Dunton himself, Rossetti wrote that it was 'the finest review that ever came from critical or friendly man. You have indeed worked with a will, and believe me, I am not cold to what you have done so warmly' (*Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 4, pp. 1926–7, 1932).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1857.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1935. The 'Literary Gossip' section of the 12 Nov. issue of the *Athenaeum* reported that: 'The first impression of Mr Rossetti's new volume of poems having been entirely exhausted immediately after publication, the volume is being reprinted with all speed.'

the first printing of 750 copies into three separate editions (of 250 copies each) in order to give the impression that the book was in demand.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Wilde had received a number of hostile reviews. One of the harshest came from the *Athenaeum*; in it Wilde's work was disparaged for his lack of 'originality', his 'slovenly workmanship', and 'conceits behind which sense and reason are obscured'.<sup>35</sup> Such a judgement, we might note, represents a completely different angle on Wilde's idea of poetry's mystery. Just four months later, the same periodical printed a laudatory review of Rossetti's volume as well as reporting on its successful sales. Lastly, Wilde had also suffered the unique ignominy of having a presentation volume of his poems sent back by the Oxford Union. The marketplace, then, as well as the critical community, had roundly rejected Wilde as a poet. In such circumstances, it is perhaps little wonder that he should have tried to rescue his wounded pride by redefining poetic worth in opposition to the value suggested by sales figures and the tastes of the general public and Oxford undergraduates. Why Wilde should appropriate Rossetti to rehearse this argument is less obvious: not only did Rossetti's own works enjoy buoyant sales, but Rossetti himself ironically shared the judgement of the reviewer of the *Athenaeum*; for him Wilde's *Poems* was a 'wretched' book. In an ironic anticipation of Richard Ellmann's misidentification of the Chatterton sonnet, Wilde had attempted to transform Rossetti into a version of himself, of the poet he wished himself to be.

There was a further irony in Wilde's position: for all his talk about the ineffable, mysterious quality of the poetic personality—that 'indivisible individuality'—his *own* life in the early 1880s was anything but private. From early 1882, when he had dressed up, and had himself photographed in New York by the society photographer, Napoleon Sarony, in an aesthetic costume in order to publicise in America a touring production of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, *Patience*, Wilde had set about quite self-consciously to manufacture a personality—to create an image of himself which would sell in exactly the market-place which elsewhere he

<sup>34</sup> In the autumn of 1881 Wilde revised the volume and Bogue produced what he called a fourth and fifth (but which modern bibliographers would recognise as the second) edition, each of 250 copies. Over half of these remained unsold. The sheets were later bought by Elkin Mathews and the volume re-issued in 1892 with handsome new bindings designed by Charles Ricketts under the imprint of the Bodley Head, the publishing house which Mathews founded with John Lane. This very limited, signed edition of just 220 copies sold out within days.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (1970; reprinted 1997), pp. 33–6.

was so keen to disparage. In other words, there was a profound disjunction between the media personality which Wilde was happily cultivating and exhibiting and the idea of the poetic personality which he was proselytising. We can see the dimensions of this contradiction in a perceptive observation made much later in 1895, by Charles Dudley Warner, the editor of the American *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Although critical of Wilde's writing, Warner nevertheless admired the success with which he advertised himself, to the extent of comparing Wilde to Phineas T. Barnum, the famous circus impresario:

It was the position of the late lamented Mr Barnum who said that the people wished to be humbugged. Barnum would have covered himself with green carnations if it would have advertised his show. And perhaps Mr Wilde knows his public equally well.<sup>36</sup>

This idea of Wilde as a performer is instructive, for it returns us neatly to the Chatterton lecture with which I began. It is in that lecture that Wilde first rehearsed in public his idea of the poet as personality. It is supremely ironic that in presenting himself as the apostle of a new kind of authentic poetic sensibility, Wilde was only too conscious of giving a performance. And such a performance was required, of course, in order to conceal Wilde the man—the man who, like Chatterton, was not above faking his art.

Personality as a function of performance—this idea seems a very long way from that essentially private sense of sacramental mystery which Wilde celebrated in the personality he saw revealed in Rossetti's poetry. Yet, and this is both the strength and the weakness of Wilde's position, there was ultimately no way to distinguish between these two kinds of personality—the mere feigning of the actor and the authentic expression of the poet. And this was because personality, in Wilde's definition, could only finally be understood in terms of its opposite: personality is simply what the man is *not*. Interestingly, this ambivalence about the extent to which personality is contrived is evident even in the Chatterton lecture. So at its conclusion, Wilde comments that Chatterton was 'essentially a dramatist', and it was precisely that dramatic ability which permitted him 'to separate the artist from the man'.

We might note here that Chatterton's personality, no less than that of Wilde, was contrived precisely because it had to stand the test of a public

<sup>36</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, 'Editor's Study', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 90 (Feb. 1895), 481–2; quoted in Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist* (1996), p. 98.

performance: that is, personality became performance when the poet entered himself into the market-place. For a figure such as Wilde, for whom writing was his main source of income, Rossetti's reclusive withdrawal from the public gaze was clearly not an option. Wilde had to bring both his wares and himself into the literary market-place—a market-place which, by the 1880s, was becoming more and more overcrowded and more and more competitive. As Wilde put it a decade later in a letter to the publisher Leonard Smithers, competing in that market made him feel like 'Lipton's tea'.<sup>37</sup> Of course Wilde was profoundly ambivalent about this need to sell himself in order to sell his art, and that ambivalence was in turn partly to do with his signal lack of success. Very few of Wilde's literary works sold in large numbers; and even though as a dramatist he did eventually earn considerable sums from the West End theatre, they were not nearly as high as critics have assumed.<sup>38</sup> Identifying with Rossetti and celebrating a poetic which eschewed the market may have been one way for Wilde to maintain his dignity and to discount failure. Throughout his lifetime, he struggled to be judged as an artist—to be valued, that is, in terms of the aesthetic personality expressed in his work. It was his profound misfortune that the majority of the public—the 'brawlers in the mart' and the gaping idlers in the market-place—followed the editor of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in seeing only the man, and in judging that man in terms merely of his consummate performance.

<sup>37</sup> *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 721.

<sup>38</sup> *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was the only one of Wilde's books to achieve a significant popular sale in his lifetime (it ran to seven editions in two years). For a discussion of Wilde's earnings from the theatre, see Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, 'How many "Bags of Red Gold": The Extent of Oscar Wilde's Success as a Dramatist', *English Literature in Transition*, 42 (1999), 283–97.