

Laura Kilbride; St. John's College, Cambridge CB2 1TP.

### **'RUBBISH?': 3 NEWLY EXTANT DRAFTS OF DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S 'THE PORTRAIT'<sup>1</sup>**

Three previously unknown interim drafts between Dante Gabriel Rossetti's early poem "On Mary's Portrait" and the later poem "The Portrait" have recently been made available via the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, raising a number of further questions for scholarship. Critical opinion of the importance of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem "The Portrait" has long acknowledged the biographical aspect. This meditation on art's work of memorialisation provoked by a picture of the speaker-artist's beloved has been read alongside Rossetti's portraits of his model and wife, the artist Elizabeth Siddal.<sup>2</sup> However, the relation between these two poems, which bookend the dates at which Rossetti was active as a painter and poet also offer an invitation to reconsider both Rossetti's drafting practices and the technique of a poem which remains a crucial test-case in any attempt to determine the usefulness of the term "Pre-Raphaelite" beyond the visual arts.

Previously these drafts formed part of the personal manuscript collection of Roy Davids who had acquired these from the auctioneer the Maggs Brothers. However, little else regarding their provenance is known. At acquisition the drafts were arranged in the following order: "The Portrait in the Library" with the annotation "Rubbish" written in an unidentified hand in the top-right hand corner and with the previous title '~~On Jane's Portrait/Which I Painted Six Years Ago~~'<sup>2</sup> deleted hereafter, "The Portrait in the Library I (PLI); "The Portrait," titled in

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mark Samuels Lasner, Florence Boos and Jerome McGann for their generosity in discussing the provenance and significance of these manuscripts during my time as Fellow in Pre-Raphaelite Studies at The University of Delaware in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion see Florence Boos, *The Poetry of DGR* (The Hague, 1976) pp. 215-226; John Masefield, *Thanks Before Going*, (London, 1946) pp. 50-51; Joan Rees, *Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Cambridge 1981) pp. 25-33; David. G. Riede, *DGR and the Limits of Victorian Vision* (Ithaca, 1983) pp. 247-249; [Elizabeth Helsinger Poetry and The Pre-Raphaelite Arts \(.\)](#) pp.?-?; The Rossetti Archive available at: < <http://www.rossettiarchive.org> > [last accessed 4 September 2013]

a later hand, afterwards “The Portrait A” (PA); and lastly “The Portrait in the Library,” afterwards “The Portrait in the Library II (PLII).” However, Dr. Florence Boos suggests that the handwriting of “The Portrait A” indicates that it predates the other two.<sup>3</sup>

The uncovering of three further manuscripts take the number of known drafts in the compositional sequence between ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ (dated 1847-8) and ‘The Portrait’ published in *Poems* (1869-70, published 1870) to ten. Neither ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ (hereafter ‘OMP’) nor ‘The Portrait’ were among the proofs which Rossetti prepared in 1869, a fact which poses the difficult question of whether one or more of these newly extant versions of “The Portrait” may have been among the manuscripts exhumed from Elizabeth Siddal’s grave in March 1869. A hole and tear run through the centre-fold of PLI, the middle draft which proves more difficult to date, and Boos notes that PA and PLI were written in a somewhat earlier variant of Rossetti’s handwriting—one possible indication that they could have lain in the coffin from 1862 through 1869. However, an initial comparison with supposed exhumation manuscripts which show damage along the top of the manuscript such as that of ‘Another Love’ bear little resemblance to the manuscripts discussed here.

One tentative suggestion for the label ‘Rubbish’ is that this is not Rossetti’s hand but that of the collector, dealer and forger T.J. Wise. Wise, who was never above scribbling on the manuscripts he collected often used this word to designate manuscripts which he did not think profitable. Writing to the art-historian and collector Charles Fairfax Murray in 1865 he anticipates Murray’s criticism: ‘But rubbish irritates me, so you must forgive me, & let me follow my own whims...’<sup>4</sup> This letter also discusses one of the extant manuscripts of ‘Jenny’, which we know Wise owned. That Wise most likely bought this manuscript from William Michael Rossetti in 1888 is suggested by a letter from him to Wise which discusses the

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<sup>3</sup> Florence Boos, with Mark Samuels Lasner, ‘Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Portraits’ Three New Drafts, *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 22 (Fall 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Letter dated July 24th 1865 held at the Bancroft collection, Delaware Art Museum.

‘original commencement of *Jenny*’, before going on to discuss Rossetti’s juvenilia: ‘As to the “unpublished poems,” they remain unpublished because they are of juvenile or otherwise defective character, such as my brother strongly objected to letting anyone see: I hardly feel that it would be fitting to authorize their being transcribed. If at any future time the existing conditions render me less strict in this regard, I will remember that you are a claimant—and you are one of the first whom I would be willing to indulge in such a matter...’<sup>5</sup> It is tempting to wonder whether the manuscripts under discussion might have been among these scraps. At present paleographical evidence remains inconclusive, and there is no way of certifying the link between these drafts and Wise.

William Michael Rossetti’s protective attitude towards his brother and sister’s literary estates has influenced later thinking on the relation between the two poems. The editors of the Rossetti Archive treat “OMP” and the later poem “The Portrait” as two separate poems, since it was believed that the latter was a rewrite which entirely rewrote the former. This understanding of the genesis of one poem to another was encouraged by William Michael Rossetti, who in his 1911 edition *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* appended a note arguing that this poem is not—as is usually assumed—autobiographical, but a redraft of the earlier poem “On Mary’s Portrait, which I painted six years ago”. He quotes stanza 12 of the poem in order to support this argument. It is worth noting here that the stanza he quotes differs from the draft under discussion here in two respects: ‘comelier’ challenges WMR’s ‘lovelier’, and the entire stanza as it is written in PLI appears within parentheses, as in the Duke Manuscript. These two variations do not entirely close down the possibility that William Michael may have been quoting from another manuscript, now not extant.

Scholars have long suspected that this note might have been a feint, designed to discredit biographical readings. As Paul Baum notes, William Michael’s description of the later poem

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<sup>5</sup> Letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> September 1888 in *Selected letters of William Michael Rossetti* ed. Roger W. Peattie (Penyslvania, 1990) pp.520-1.

which includes only nine and a half lines of ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ as a ‘considerably revised’ version ‘hardly meets the case’.<sup>6</sup> These interim drafts, currently being dated and prepared by Florence Boos, re-open the question of the relation between the two poems. The fact that PL I is a substantial reworking of OMP; and P II contain material from OMP forces us to acknowledge a clear relation between the poems for the first time.

Boos suggests that PA may be an earlier draft of “On Mary’s Portrait,” antedating the only previously extant version, and PLI a later, interim draft containing stanzas from both its antecedent “On Mary’s Portrait” and from later versions. PLII forms a collection of drafted stanzas, many of them scored through to indicate deletion. Some of these stanzas are clearly first attempts on the way to the first proofs printed in October 1869 after the opening of Elizabeth Siddal’s grave.

Though manuscript evidence can only ever offer a partial view of the thinking of an individual verse-writer, these interim drafts may change our view of Rossetti’s poem in a number of ways. For example, in PLI, which shows Rossetti composing at a mid-interim stage, the phrase “open sunwarm library” in the second stanza retained from ‘OMP’ is changed to “open lawn-built library”, an emendation which shows a hesitation over the appropriate setting for this meditation on love and loss, which becomes much less domestic, and much more dream-like in ‘The Portrait. The changing temporal frame of Rossetti’s thinking—the ‘dew’ on the grass in the place where the lover’s first met is qualified through three changes of adjective: ‘wet’, ‘live’, before settling on ‘old’—is also carried by the reduction of archaism. In stanza 7 “And a hand pusheth ope the door” became “And a hand pushes wide the door”.

More striking is the shift from the more paratactic, exclamatory dramatic monologue, **reminiscent of Browning**, in ‘OMP’ which seems to be worked through in the drafts in relation to the problem of apostrophe. Lines which appear in ‘OMP’ as ‘is she/ In the dark

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Baum, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Analytical List of Manuscripts in the Duke University Library, with Hitherto Unpublished Verse and Prose* (Durham, 1931) p.27.

always, choked with clay?’ is changed to ‘deaf’ with clay?’), an emendation which removes the internal rhyme, yet is suggestive for the difference it makes to the beloved’s ability to hear the speaker’s address. The urgency of that possibility is demonstrated in stanza 6, when the line retained from “OMP,” maintains the rhythm, but changes a statement into a rhetorical question, so that: “I was as calm as silence. I / Do think, perchance” becomes: “Do you not think, . . . ?”—a hanging question.

Rossetti’s changing imagery in these drafts demonstrates how he alters content while maintaining rhythmical fit. Lines which describe the track of Spring, which—the speaker hopes—might bring the lost love back change ‘Flowers, like a water fowl’s bright track’, to “a brightness like a swan’s bright track”—an almost proto-imagist move to arrest the object of contemplation which would not be out of place in Ezra Pound’s “corrections” of F.S. Flint’s poem ‘The Swan’.<sup>7</sup> Considered alone, this emendation is not enough to pitch the poem as a case-study in the history of the development of Anglo-American poetry. However, recognising proto-imagist moves such as these is one step towards understanding in stylistic terms the gains and losses which comprise modernist ambivalence towards Pre-Raphaelite poetry.

One aspect of Rossetti’s style which must remain central to any exploration of the development of both of his style and the Pre-Raphaelite poem is rhyme. These three new drafts show marked differences in schema. Following Boos’ chronology, the manuscript ‘PA’, which is understood to predate ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ tends to follow a first tentative alternately rhyming quatrain with two ‘bacciata’ (Dante’s word for “kissed”) couplet rhyme) before a final throw-back rhyme which hints back towards the fifth line: *abcbddeed*.

The stanza of ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ follows the same schema. However, here the rhyme-words become closer and the characteristic half-rhymes are diminished. If an unsettling of the

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<sup>7</sup> For a readable account of Pound’s emendations see Helen Carr *The Verse Revolutionaries* (London, 2013) 543-5.

rhyme-scheme occurs, it is through the unexpected placement of an f-rhyme (as in stanza 10), rather than the expected d-rhyme throwback in the final line. ← so what?

In PL II, which Boos describes as a ‘further interim draft’ between ‘On Mary’s Portrait’ and ‘The Portrait’ Rossetti seems to have considered compressing and tightening the poem further, compressing it to an octet *abcddec*. Several stanzas of this kind in the draft suggest either an attempt to work back towards an earlier schema, or the calque of an irresistible earlier rhyme-scheme. In either case, this scheme is a vital point of comparison for anyone seeking to understand why Rossetti in the final scheme of ‘The Portrait’ tightens the initial quatrain before the *bacciata* to rhyme alternately, so that the stanza runs: *ababccdde*. Notably, in this final stanza form the half-rhymes of PA are re-introduced, for example, in the d-rhymes of stanza 9, in which rhyme-tension between ‘heath’ and ‘breath’ is resolved by the throw-back rhyme ‘death’. ← so what?

This partial account cannot begin to approximate a description of either Rossetti’s style, or that larger chimera of: the Pre-Raphaelite poem. To make a rigorous case for the Pre-Raphaelite poem further comparison of stylistic traits such as tense, diction, imagery and rhyme-scheme will be required. ← However: new drafts: new ways of looking at a poem which will be central to...any future discussion about pre-Raphaelite poetics...

LAURA KILBRIDE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE