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“Cultivated Idleness”: Carlyle, Wilde, and Victorian Representations of Creative Labor

“On [Oscar Wilde’s] return to London he bought the table at which Carlyle had written his *French Revolution*, hoping with a vain and pathetic hope... to stir himself by these outward observances into literary industry.”
---Arundell Esdaile¹

Ford Madox Brown’s painting “Work” (*figure 1*) famously announces its meaning in multiple registers: in the image itself, in the extensive catalogue notes that Brown wrote to accompany the painting’s exhibition in 1865, in the painting’s title, and even in the thirteen-year date range listed with that title (1852-1865), which suggests that the artist’s effort was no less significant, no less sustained than that of the road-repairing navvies depicted in the image.

[insert figure 1 about here]

So profound is the painting’s connection to mid-Victorian notions of labor and art that Tim Barringer calls upon it to exemplify his argument that “the sphere of the visual image, and more specifically the representation of the male laboring body, provided the most powerful and significant formulation of work as the nexus of ethical and aesthetic value” during that period.² Among the male laboring bodies depicted, standing off to the right of the road workers, are Thomas Carlyle and the Reverend Frederick Maurice. Brown acknowledges that they appear “as having nothing to do.”³ But, he continues, “these are the brainworkers who, seeming to be idle, work, and are the cause of well-ordained work in others.”⁴ Brown’s justification may seem strained, as many have argued, inasmuch as the artist requires recourse to text whereas his other points—that, for example, the navy “occupies the place of hero”—are evidently manifest in the image itself.⁵ Nevertheless, through the combination of text and painting, Brown aligns ethical and

¹ Arundell Esdaile, “The New Hellenism,” *Fortnightly Review* 88, no. 256 (October 1910): 707-22; 717.

² Timothy Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2005), 1-2.

³ Ford Madox Brown, reprinted in Kenneth Bendiner, *The Art of Ford Madox Brown* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1997), 152.

⁴ Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152, 93; see also Barringer, *Men at Work*, and Rob Breton, *Gospels and Grit: Work and Labour in Carlyle, Conrad, and Orwell* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2005).

aesthetic value with the laboring body and links manual labor with intellectual labor, an equation in which Carlyle would figure through the end of the century and beyond.

If Brown's work captures one well known—perhaps too well known—mid-century vision of laboring male bodies, another contemporary work poses a starkly contrasting model of a brainworker: Henry Wallis's 1856 painting of the young poet Thomas Chatterton (*figure 2*), a composition completed in the years that Brown was at work on "Work."

[insert figure 2 about here]

It is only around half the size of Brown's painting, but it shares the same jewel-toned palette, the same Pre-Raphaelite-inflected commitment to naturalistic representation, and remarkably, the same arched frame—it is, in other words, of the same milieu. Yet its central figure is strikingly different: alone, inside a claustrophobic room, dead or dying, immaculate in his beauty, and surrounded by the desecrated products of his labor, torn shreds of his poems, scattered on the floor to prevent others from seeing or profiting from them (or so the story goes). The image helped to revive a vision of Chatterton (1752-1770) as the underappreciated Romantic genius *par excellence*, writing in his miserable attic garret, taking his own life at just seventeen to escape a world that was unable or unwilling to recognize his manifold gifts. Central to Chatterton's compelling biography is a narrative he invented, that of Thomas Rowley, a fictional fifteenth-century monk whom Chatterton credited with writing a series of poems found in the church of St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol. These poems, which Chatterton composed in a pseudo-medieval language on discarded parchments, would come to be adored by generations that followed him. In Wallis's painting, the evidence of Chatterton's labor—those scattered shreds of paper—is overwhelmed by the stillness of his glorious figure. Similarly, underscoring Chatterton's Rowley fiction is a central conceit that, as one of its imaginative gestures, privileges the artistic unity of the completed artefact over demonstrations of labor. By ascribing authorship to someone else entirely, the forger abdicates claims of effort. In a sense, Chatterton's Rowley creation—and the Victorian revival of interest in the young poet, his invented monk, and the poems ostensibly composed by that monk—enacted a relationship with labor antithetical to the mode vaunted in Brown's painting.

The contrast between Brown's and Wallis's paintings, and the narratives they engender, provides a useful starting point from which to consider accounts of intellectual and artistic production that developed concurrently in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the critical discourse around creative production in the 1860s and 1870s, the relationship between the value of the work of art and the labor or spirit with which it is produced was increasingly contested. Punctuating this period were two cultural watersheds that helped to ossify opposing stereotypes of creative agency: the Whistler v. Ruskin trial of 1878, in which the role of Carlylean labor in determining art's value was ostensibly adjudicated, and the codification of the visual vocabulary of

Aestheticism, which adopted its tropes from Chatterton. This essay considers the literary contexts in which these competing figures arose, to demonstrate the degree to which they developed in conversation with each other. I suggest that the linking of Carlylean intellectual labor with masculine vigor occurred through the distillation of iconography (as in Brown's painting) and creation narratives, both by and about Carlyle, that were mutually reinforcing even as they were reductive. Foremost among these narratives is the story of the loss and rewriting of Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. The clarity and specificity of the trope of Carlylean labor serves as a pole against which the Chattertonian model stands in relation: it culminates a version of affected indolence that has little to do with Chatterton's actual writerly habits, or with the actual writerly habits of those who chose Chatterton as their emblem. Oscar Wilde led this charge.⁶ My discussion depends on the accretion of many, representative artefacts: widely read and broadly circulated texts and images, primarily from the periodical press. In these, the optics of authorship trump empirical facticity; in other words, whether the author's experience of the creative process is accurately represented is less important than the representation itself.

"Up then at thy work": A Carlylean Creation Narrative

The identification of Carlylean labor with a masculine, vital energy is not necessarily a consequence of his own multiform conceptions of the value of work or labor; nor is it necessarily a conclusion that can be drawn directly from any of his works on the subject. If Brown's "Work" can be understood as the apotheosis of the visual glorification of mid-Victorian labor, the story of the manuscript of Carlyle's *The French Revolution* might be its literary equivalent, a story distilled through decades of retelling, reduced in the public imagination into a mythic account of authorial genius. The outlines of the famous story are quickly summarized: in the early 1830s, John Stuart

⁶ Conventional wisdom (and decades of scholarship) suggests that the Carlylean model of creative labor displaced the Romantic model and then held sway through the nineteenth century until a break was catalyzed and fostered at the fin de siècle by the Aesthetic movement, which reached its apotheosis in the works and life of Oscar Wilde. This idea was forcefully codified in the mid-twentieth century by Jerome Buckley (*The Victorian Temper* [Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1951]) and John Holloway (*The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* [London: Archon Books, 1962]). Other treatments of labor in nineteenth-century Britain have grown far too numerous and varied to enumerate fully here. Recent studies include works on labor in relation to the public intellectual or prophet/sage (Stephan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thoughts and Intellectual Life in Britain* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1991]), gender (Martin Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005]; Patricia Zakreski, *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* [Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006]; Michelle Tusan, "Reforming Work: Gender, Class, and the Printing Trade in Victorian Britain," *Journal of Women's History* 16, no. 1 [2004]: 103-126; and Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991]), and fiction (Breton, *Gospels and Grit*; and Carolyn Lesjack, *Working Fictions: A Genealogy of the Victorian Novel* [Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006]), though none deals with creation narratives in a sustained fashion.

Mill encouraged Carlyle to write a history of the French Revolution. Despite Mill's support, the writing—in Carlyle's own words—got on “so dreadfully *slowly*,”⁷ but he did complete the first volume and gave the manuscript, which represented an extended period of preparation and five months painstaking writing, to Mill for reading. On 6 March 1835, Mill and his partner Harriet Taylor visited the Carlyles to deliver the news that the manuscript had been accidentally destroyed, all but a few pages burnt. Details beyond this set of facts vary, and depending on the version, the thematic emphasis falls in various places. It can be understood as a narrative about the character of the unlucky author. In a letter to Mill written the morning after the news was broken, Carlyle is optimistic: “That I *can* write a Book on the French Revolution is (God be thanked for it) as clear to me as ever; also that if life be given me so long, I will. To it again, therefore! *Andar con Dios!*”; and just a few weeks after the staggering loss, he writes to his mother about the accident, insisting to her that he could now “not only say that [he] *would* get over it, but that [he] had [gotten] over it,” and assuring her that he did “really believe the Book will be the better.”⁸ These renderings inscribe both the generosity of Carlyle's friendship and his creative resilience. The story might also be rendered into hagiography: one of Carlyle's versions serves as a testament to the faithful loyalty of his wife Jane. In an account written shortly after her death in 1866, though not published until after Carlyle's own death, he consolidates a vision of Jane as the beneficent “angel in the house,”⁹ a quality delineated with particular clarity in contrast to the unconventional Mill/Taylor relationship.

In the only account of the event published in Carlyle's lifetime—a “Table Talk” column in *Harpers* (January 1863)—the Rev. William Henry Milburn recounts his conversations with Carlyle. In this story of the manuscript's loss, neither Jane, Mrs. Taylor, nor Mill himself is mentioned. Instead, the “Table Talk” story focuses solely on Carlyle as an intellectual and physical laborer in terms that strikingly recall the road-repairing navvies of Brown's picture. (Though “Table Talk” was published nearly thirty years after the events it described, only three years had passed since Carlyle was photographed by Brown for “Work,” which was nearing completion.¹⁰ One biographer dates Carlyle's conversations with Milburn “around 1860,” which would put the

⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle: Volume 8: January 1835-June 1836*, ed. Charles Sanders (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974), 62. Emphasis here, and in all quotes from Carlyle, is in the original.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71; 83-84.

⁹ This account further situates his and Jane's marriage as a moral alternative to the transgressive Mill-Taylor union, a representation that was perpetuated in later biographies of the author. Emery Neff, for example, frames the loss explicitly in light of the Carlyles' disapproval of Mrs. Taylor. Neff, *Carlyle and Mill: Mystic and Utilitarian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1924), 24.

¹⁰ Julian Treuherz, *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer* (Manchester: Manchester Art Gallery, 2007), 206.

conversation even closer to Carlyle's encounter with Brown¹¹). According to Millburn, Carlyle described the writing process as tortured: after "struggling for months and years with dim confusion and wild anarchy," he felt as if he had "at length gained some victory, and built a highway that will bear the pressure of [one's] own foot, and perhaps the feet of generations yet to come, and the morning has dawned."¹² After the fire, he was plunged back "in the centre of pitchy darkness, in the whirl of commingling elements."¹³

What brings Carlyle around in this telling, though, is the sight of manual labor. After "many a weary day" with little progress, he watches a bricklayer building a wall: "With a trowel he'd lay a great splash of mortar upon the last layer, and then brick after brick would be deposit upon this, striking each with the butt of his trowel, as if to give it his benediction and farewell; and all the while singing or whistling as blithe as a lark."¹⁴ After first pitying the man for his merriment in the face of a world "rushing into the regions of the insane," Carlyle rallies himself, invoking a line that appears in *The French Revolution*: "Man! Symbol of Eternity imprisoned into Time! It is not thy works, which are infinitely mortal, infinitely little, and the greatest no greater than the least, but only the spirit thou workest in which can have worth or continuance! Up then at thy work, and be cheerful!" He then recounts spending a few weeks reading novels,¹⁵ and concludes "thus refreshed I took heart of grace again, applied me to my work, and in course of time 'The French Revolution' got finished; as all things must, sooner or later."¹⁶

Apostrophizing labor with such enthusiasm is not surprising for Carlyle, but the particular focus of his vision is a freighted choice: the vision of the bricklayer echoes Brown's painting, as does Carlyle's description of mind work as building "a highway." In the vignette following the account of the manuscript, Carlyle is apparently prompted by Milburn to explain the term "navvies" and declares them "brawny, broad-shouldered workers of modern miracles."¹⁷ By aligning Carlyle's writing with the physical trials of the brick-laying navvy, this account goes much further than Brown does in his exhibition notes. Whereas Brown allowed that the work of thinker and cleric may inspire "well-ordained work and happiness in others," the "Table Talk" story equates Carlyle's intellectual labor with such well-ordained work. What is more, the emphasis on

¹¹ Alfred Guernsey, *Thomas Carlyle: His Life, His Books, His Theories* (London: D. Appleton, 1879), 18.

¹² William Henry Milburn, "Table Talk," *Harper's Monthly* 26, no. 152 (1863): 221-226; 224.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Carlyle's novel reading is reported to have lasted two weeks (Neff, *Carlyle and Mill*, 24), three weeks (Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. James A. Froude [London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1881], 410), or three months (Richard Herne Shepherd and Charles N. Williamson, *Memoirs and the Life and Writings of Thomas Carlyle*, 2 vols. [London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1881], 1:144).

¹⁶ Milburn, "Table Talk," 221.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

the value of the “spirit” in which one works, as opposed to the result of that labor, grants additional importance to the creation narrative, which, unless articulated, cannot be viewed as readily as the physical toil of the “brawny, broad-shouldered” workers.¹⁸ The story of the text’s creation thus renders unseen intellectual work appreciable, and that creation story becomes tethered to the written product: in some sense, it is difficult to separate the material object, Carlyle’s *French Revolution* book, from the story of its genesis.

Even as they note the inconsistencies in the “Table Talk” account, biographers nevertheless perpetuate its version of the tale, which offers neither panegyric to Carlyle’s wife nor a reassuring testament of his quick recovery. Regardless of the objective veracity of the story, because of this repetition in the biographical record it has come to serve as the definitive version of the narrative that has in turn come to serve as the ultimate example of the work ethic Carlyle endorsed.¹⁹ The many obituaries that repeat the fire story demonstrate its omnipresence; it functions as shorthand for the entirety of the work ethic identified with the author (even at the expense of his actual works). Just as “well known” as the “the loss of the manuscript of [*The French Revolution*] through the carelessness of a servant” was, one paper reported, “the manliness with which Carlyle set to work to write it afresh.”²⁰ Even some thirty years after Carlyle’s 1881 death, the story of the “mishap” was still, according to Robert Kerlin, “possibly as well known as of any similar kind in literary history”; Carlyle, Kerlin writes, “heroically repaired” the loss.²¹ This “heroic” or “manly” work ethic was designated as a necessary counter to the ideals of the preceding generation of brainworkers. In its obituary, the *Bath Chronicle* declared that in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, “The hero of the reading classes was still the Byronic hero—

¹⁸ James Eli Adams explores the relationship between the hero that Carlyle endorsed and the dandy that Carlyle critiqued, suggesting that the hero’s “insistent specularity” makes him surprisingly akin to the dandy, “abjectly dependent on the recognition of the audience he professes to disdain” (*Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995], 22). Whereas Adams tracks the late Victorian recasting of Carlyle’s project as a “enervating, effeminizing force,” (a line of thought that, as Adams notes, was articulated in the 1870s by the reactionary W. J. Courthope), I argue that the bricklayer narrative had more purchase—not merely because the figure was universally recognizable—and it locates mental work in the realm of the physical.

¹⁹ The “Table Talk” fire story is quoted at length in the following biographies, among others: Henry James Nicholl, *Thomas Carlyle* (Edinburgh: Macniven & Wallace, 1881), 78-81; Guernsey, *Thomas Carlyle: His Life, His Books, His Theory*, 86-89; Shepherd and Williamson, *Memoirs and the Life and Writing of Thomas Carlyle*, 1:141-144; William Howie Wylie, *Thomas Carlyle: The Man and his Books* (London: Marshall Japp and Company, 1881), 183-185; and David Alec Wilson, *Life of Carlyle*, 2 vols. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1924), 2:384-386. Shepherd and Williamson note that multiple versions of the story conflict with each other (1:144).

²⁰ “Thomas Carlyle,” *Northern Echo* 7 February 1881, 4.

²¹ Robert Kerlin, “Contemporary Criticism of Carlyle’s *French Revolution*,” *The Sewanee Review* 20.3 (July 1912): 282-296; 282.

surely the grossest as well as the most palpable of literary shams”; Carlyle, though, demonstrated that “by the worship of work and of truth, by the due and religious avoidance of all shams wheresoever found,” man “might achieve a greatness worthy the unceasing labour of a lifetime.”²² In a talk only a few months after Carlyle’s death, the Rev. W. F. Adeney argued that Carlyle’s fastidiousness in writing might have “horrified the printers,” but it taught a lesson to the public at large: “Ordinary people were disposed to consider genius to be a sort of magical power of doing miracles instead of the capacity of taking pains. Clever men often failed in life through sheer idleness.”²³

This sharp (though patently reductive) binary that arose between masculine, Carlylean industry and the idleness of the clever wastrel originated through contrast with Carlyle’s antecedents, not through contrast with his contemporaries, allowing Carlyle to represent an epochal corrective to the lassitude that defined the Romantics. Such an approach, I argue, clarified a Carlylean Victorianism as utterly distinct from an increasingly narrow conception of the Romantics, with whom he had in fact a tremendous amount in common. The connection between Carlyle and labor that would come to be seen as an organizing force of the mid-nineteenth century was not simply a feature of rose-tinted obituaries. Writing in 1870 on the occasion of the publication of a new edition of Carlyle’s works, John Morley described Carlyle in relation to Byron in gendered terms: “Carlylism is the male of Byronism.”²⁴ Morley continues, “It is Byronism with thew and sinew, bass pipe and shaggy bosom. There is the same grievous complaint against the time and its men and its spirit, something even of the same despair, the same sense of the puniness of man in the centre of a cruel and frowning universe: but there is in Carlylism a deliverance from it all; indeed, the only deliverance possible.”²⁵ That deliverance is work. At the base of Carlyle’s philosophy is the idea that “common-sense is the measure of life, and that to work hard is a prime precept of common sense.” “We cannot wonder,” Morley concludes, “that Byronism was routed from the field.”²⁶ Nearly a century later, Jerome Buckley would revive this formulation, insisting that Carlyle was the “the greatest” “senior seer” of the “Anti-Romantic” movement: “it has meant much to the artists and artisans of the thirties and forties that their leader in breaking with a

²² “Thomas Carlyle,” *Bath Chronicle* 10 February 1881, 8.

²³ “Thomas Carlyle,” *Surrey Mirror* 2 April 1881, 7.

²⁴ John Morley, “Carlyle,” *Fortnightly Review* 8, no. 43 (July 1870): 11. For analyses of labor and masculinity in Victorian England, see Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*; Barringer, *Men at Work*; Breton, *Gospels and Grit*; and Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Nearly all demonstrate the instability of any single idea of the masculine, and rightly so, but as is clear in comments like Morley’s, much contemporary writing was predicated on the assumption of a stable conception of the masculine.

²⁵ John Morley, “Carlyle,” *Fortnightly Review* 8, no. 43 (July 1870): 1-22; 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

‘romantic past,’ their chief ‘bringer-back of men to reality,’ had instilled a positive faith which might guide their immediate labors.”²⁷

Contesting Brainwork in the 1870s and 1880s

The simplification of Carlyle’s complex positions on work to a nearly fetishized notion of an anti-Romantic, masculinized labor helped to enshrine this vision—and Carlyle himself—as definitively Victorian in his own lifetime. I am suggesting that this view is incomplete at best. Critical discourse of the period demonstrates that, just as notions of the Romantic were very much in flux, so too was the notion of effort in relation to literary or artistic production. It is no coincidence that a robust revival of interest in the life and works of Thomas Chatterton was brewing during these very years. Here, too, Carlyle provides a useful counterpoint. In Carlyle’s telling, outside of dutiful work there was one alternative means of deliverance from a torturous universe—death—and the Romantic embrace of suicide told of the central failure of the zeitgeist of the era. In his early biography of Schiller (1825), Carlyle insists that “nine-tenths of the miseries and vices of mankind proceed from idleness.”²⁸ Among those who “perished bitterly, with their tasks unfinished, under these corroding woes” was Chatterton, who “sought out a more stern quietus...turning [his] indignant steps away from a world which refused [him] welcome.”²⁹ This was not a fleeting sentiment. In an 1870 letter, he wrote to fellow Scot Daniel Wilson—who had recently published a major scholarly biography of Chatterton that encouraged the ongoing Chatterton revival—that though he appreciated Wilson’s sympathy towards the young poet, he felt that Chatterton “was incapable of being saved,” and that “there was something wrong in the original conformation of him.”³⁰ It is unclear whether Carlyle objects more to Chatterton’s craft or to his character. Of the former, Carlyle “[remarks] in [Chatterton’s] marvellously precocious Poetry, far more of shining colour...than of any finer spiritual element”; he diagnosed Chatterton’s character as having “too much of vehemence and violence for any piety and loyalty he had; —clearly a considerable want of reverence, and an enormous overplus of mere ambition and egoism.”³¹ This view of Chatterton is of a piece with Carlyle’s conception of Wertherism, which he critiqued for forwarding a fundamentally flawed Romantic understanding of the world: “If the world were really no better than what Goethe imagined it to be there was nothing for it but suicide. If it has nothing to support itself upon but these poor sentimentalities, view-huntings,

²⁷ Jerome Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), 33, 39-40.

²⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of Friedrich Schiller* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1825), 71-72.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³⁰ Thomas Carlyle, Letter to Daniel Wilson, 10 January 1870. British Library, Add. MS 47867.

³¹ *Ibid.*

trivialities, this world was really not fit to live in.”³² In choosing to turn his back on the work that could deliver him from the miseries and vices of himself and his chosen society, Chatterton exemplified (according to Carlyle’s schema) the worst of Romantic tendencies—a diseased understanding of man’s place in the world coupled with a shirking of work that foreclosed the possibility of productive deliverance.

In the years that Carlyle was positioned as the antidote to Romanticism, the groups of artists who took up the mantle of the Romantics negotiated an alternate approach to deliverance from the toils of the modern universe, one which vaunted Chatterton for reasons other than his youthful suicide. This negotiation is evident in the “Fleshly School” debate of the 1870s that focused on the moral content of art, not its manner of creation. The primary provocation was, of course, Robert Buchanan’s 1871 polemic “The Fleshly School of Poetry,” which is frequently noted for its scathing indictment of Rossetti’s poetry, but which also includes often-overlooked comments on the relative effort with which writers seemed to produce their work. Buchanan takes to task the *Athenaeum* for its praise that “Mr. Swinburne dashed off his noble ode *at a sitting*,” and objects—with an exclamation point in parentheses, no less—to the *Academy*’s comment that “‘during the past year or two Mr. Swinburne has written several novels’ (!).”³³ Regarding Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s 1871 collection *Poems*—the primary focus of his invective—though, Buchanan insists that “There is very little writing in the volume spontaneous in the sense that some of Swinburne’s verses are spontaneous; the poems all look as if they have taken a great deal of trouble.”³⁴ If Buchanan objected to claims of Swinburne’s speed, he also reproached Rossetti for producing work that appeared labored-over. One must not deny one’s labor, it seems, but one’s work must not show that labor; at the very least, evidence of effort must be shaped in both the finished work and its context or the narrative of its creation, a fine line that would lead to some interesting critical wrangling.

Where exactly the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood members fit on the spectrum from Chattertonian denial to Carlylean amplification of effort is not exactly clear: they lack the thumping insistence of Carlyle’s devotion, and also lack his emphasis on process over the work itself. Swinburne’s response to Buchanan, for example, insists that the value of the artwork will out: “good work and worthy to last is indestructible; and to destroy with all due speed any

³² Thomas Carlyle, “Wertherism,” in *Lectures on the History of Literature*, ed. J. Reay Greene (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 194. For Collini, this idea is central to Carlyle’s world view: Carlyle “gave most memorable expression to” the attempts of “Victorian Werthers” to “[act] out their own form of the Romantic malaise...trying to find in work and duty an antidote to the ever-threatening perils of languid *Weltschmerz*” (*Public Moralists* 74).

³³ Robert Buchanan, “The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti,” *Contemporary Review* 18 (August 1871): 334-350; 336.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 341-342.

destructible person or book not worthy to last is no injury to any one whatever, but the greatest service that can be done to the book and the writer themselves.”³⁵ This stance can be read as a refutation of the idea that it is the spirit of the labor and not the writing itself that gives meaning to literary works. Dante Gabriel Rossetti admonished Ford Madox Brown for overwork, and his own letters detail a relatively untroubled composition process and a desire that his art should fetch high enough prices to compensate his efforts.³⁶ Scholars remain split on the issue. Kristin Mahoney notes that in the 1850s, Rossetti joined Ruskin’s efforts by teaching at the Working Men’s College, and Rossetti’s pedagogy could be seen as embracing the limits of representation and encouraging work—or at least learning—for its own sake and not its potential financial rewards.³⁷ Barringer, conversely, situates Ruskin’s philosophy of artistic creation in direct opposition to D. G. Rossetti’s; he counts Rossetti among the Aesthetes, a position that Rossetti himself would likely have resisted.³⁸ To use Josephine Guy’s phrasing, “the Rossetti celebrated by Wilde did not necessarily correspond to the way in which Rossetti had seen himself.”³⁹ The context for Barringer’s position on Ruskin and Rossetti is the rise of a coherent Aesthetic movement, which he sees as constituting the definitive break between the high Victorian ethics of labor and moral or artistic value: “[u]nder the challenge of Aestheticism,” he writes, “labour and value were no longer bound together.”⁴⁰ In fact, labor and value remained for the Aesthetes inextricably linked, though the terms of the relationship had shifted. To the extent that the Carlylean model trumpeted, or even exaggerated, the physical or psychical expenditure required for creative production, the Aesthetic model downplayed that expenditure: both must be understood as renditions of a creative process necessarily circumscribed by ideology and even fashion.

Moreover, notions of the Aesthetic and the value of labor were never in stable opposition, as can be seen in critics’ attempts to reconcile philosophies of content with their modes of production. On the one hand, Morley, who credited Carlyle’s “thew and sinew” with “routing” Byron from the field, again provides a telling example in his analysis of Pater’s *Renaissance* and its

³⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Under the Microscope* (Portland, ME: Thomas Mosher, 1899), 20.

³⁶ William Michael Rossetti writes that his brother was occupied with ideas of “how to paint good pictures, and write good poems, in both of which efforts he was as fastidious in execution as he was free and energetic in invention.” *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters*, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), 1:404.

³⁷ Kristin Mahoney, “Work, Lack, and Longing: Rossetti’s ‘The Blessed Damozel’ and the Working Men’s College,” *Victorian Studies* 52, no. 2 (2010): 219-248; 220.

³⁸ Barringer, *Men at Work*, 314.

³⁹ Josephine M. Guy, “‘Trafficking with Merchants for His Soul’: Dante Gabriel Rossetti among the Aesthetes,” *Proceedings of the British Academy: 1999 Lectures and Memoirs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171-186; 172.

⁴⁰ Barringer, *Men at Work*, 318.

famous directive to embrace aesthetic beauty and “[t]o burn always with this hard, gem-like flame.”⁴¹ Morley assesses Pater in similar terms to those used in his discussion of Carlyle, and Pater, perhaps surprisingly, fares well under the schema. Writing in a fiercely positive review for the *Fortnightly*, Morley prefaced his defense of Pater’s genius by stating that “the fatuous association of genius with disorder and haste is giving way to the more rational association of sound and powerful work with minute, searching, disciplined industry.”⁴² Pater’s process was indeed, Morley argues, one of “disciplined industry.” In this view, Pater’s proto-Aesthetic text evidences (or *must* evidence) the Carlylean industry that was a corrective to, not an extension of, Romantic creativity. On the other hand, Buchanan, whose criticism of Rossetti’s verse had been so acerbic, did not simply embrace labor as the healthy corrective to “fleshly” verse-making. He was quick to question much in Carlyle’s philosophy of work: “If Work means simply labouring hard in some useful vocation, from carrying bricks to making books, scorning to beg, being truthful and upright, respecting the proprietors, and reverencing the terrestrial and celestial authorities, how does human Work—any more than the pertinacity of the ant, or the zeal of the bee—assist us to a solution of the problem of the Universe?”⁴³ Morley, in other words, turns Pater into a worker-bee, while Buchanan derides work for the sake of work.

The nuance of these critical positions was undercut—or perhaps it is more accurate to say overwhelmed—by two highly visible events that encouraged the antagonistic positioning of the Chattertonian/Romantic against the Carleyean/Victorian: the 1878 Whistler v. Ruskin libel trial and the codification of an Aesthetic visual vocabulary in satirical cartoons. Other scholars, Linda Merrill foremost among them, have explored the ramifications of Whistler v. Ruskin with far greater depth than I can offer here. Briefly, Whistler accused Ruskin with libel for an article in which he charged Whistler with “Cockney impudence” for asking 200 guineas for “flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face”—that is, for the composition “Nocturne in Black and Gold” then on display at the Grosvenor Gallery.⁴⁴ As the exhibited work of art did not conform to conventional expectations of form or finish, Ruskin simply concluded that the artist did not labor sufficiently in its creation. Though they argued Whistler’s lack of effort was self-evident, Ruskin’s defense nevertheless examined Whistler about the time he spent on the canvas, asking if “the labor of two

⁴¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 189.

⁴² John Morley, “Mr. Pater’s Essays,” *Fortnightly Review* 13, no. 76 (April 1873): 469-477; 470.

⁴³ Robert Buchanan, “Wylie’s Life of Thomas Carlyle,” *The Contemporary Review* (May 1881): 792-803; 800.

⁴⁴ James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Heinemann, 1892), 58.

days is that for which you ask two hundred guineas?”⁴⁵ As John Dixon Hunt points out, Whistler’s famous retort—“No. I ask it for the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime”—echoes a favorite line of Ruskin’s.⁴⁶ Hunt suggests that “perhaps Whistler was even invoking [the phrase] ironically” to demonstrate the bad faith of Ruskin’s criticism as well as his own knowledge of Ruskin’s work.⁴⁷ In either reading, the remark functions as more than an archly egoistic refutation of effort. Such subtle inter-textual play was, however, lost in the often reductive press accounts, and in the public imaginary the trial seems to have amplified the rift between the Aesthetic (as represented by Whistler) and the Victorian (as represented by Ruskin), with the added effect of positioning Ruskin and his view with a conservatism focused on the past and Whistler with the future.⁴⁸ In contrast, the development of Aesthetic satires perpetuated this rift between the working Victorian and the lazy Aesthete by aligning the Aesthete not with the future but with his Romantic forbears—reaching back to the model of creativity for which many argued Carlyle provided a corrective—or at least with the caricatured aspects of the Romantic poets, and the compelling visual cue was Wallis’s Chatterton.

Long before Rossetti would declare Chatterton the “*true* day-spring of modern romantic poetry” and long before George Du Maurier adopted Wallis’s Chatterton as a prototype for his cartoon Aesthetes in *Punch*, Wallis’s painting stood as an example of the figurative excesses of pre-Raphaelitism—the privileging of the surface over deeper truths.⁴⁹ In an 1857 assessment of the burgeoning “Pre-Raffaelitism,” Rev. Edward Young critiqued Wallis’s painting in terms that anticipate objections to Aestheticism: “Had one of us climbed the silent garret, and found poor Chatterton a ghastly corpse, I suppose we should never have thought a moment about puce-colored breeches or dainty stockings. Go to that very wonderful painting by Mr. Wallis, and you have an image, not of a dead man in silk breeches, but of silk breeches with a dead man in them. This characteristic surrender of subordination—this swamping a man in his small clothes—is no mere offence against Art; it *strikes* deeper.”⁵⁰ One reviewer lauded this line of Young’s argument,

⁴⁵ Linda Merrill, *A Pot of Paint: Aesthetics on Trial in Whistler v. Ruskin* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution in collaboration with the Freer Gallery of Art, 1992), 148.

⁴⁶ Merrill, *A Pot of Paint*, 148; John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (London: Phoenix, 1998), 373.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *The Wider Sea*, 373.

⁴⁸ This view has gained traction in the work of critics such as Merrill and Rachel Teukolsky (*The Literate Eye*), who view Whistler squarely as a proto-Modernist.

⁴⁹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “To Thomas Henry Hall Caine,” 23 May 1880, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, 9 vols. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002–2010), 9:186.

⁵⁰ Edward Young, *Pre-Raffaellitism; or, A Popular Enquiry into Some Newly-Asserted Principles connected with the Philosophy, Poetry, Religion, and Revolution of Art* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857), 240-241. Emphasis in the original.

though he defended the lush depiction of the young poet's clothing as a means to represent the vanity that led to Chatterton's demise.⁵¹

Chatterton is important not because he was indolent—in fact, in his short life he produced an incredible amount of work—but because the combination of the Rowley narrative and the legacy of Wallis's paining generated a story that could be coded as an abdication of morality and labor or, as recuperated and appropriated by Aesthetes and his circle, a model of generative imagination. In retrospect, these connections were obvious: upon the publication of a new Vale Press edition of the Rowley poems in 1899, a reviewer remarked that “Chatterton anticipates, by nearly a century, that peculiar phase of our more recent verse which Mr. Pater has designated ‘the Æsthetic School of Poetry.’”⁵² As early as the 1870s and 1880s, Chatterton and his verse came to function as a site for proxy debates on Aestheticism: on the one hand vaunted as uniquely creative, on the other dismissed as simply a precocious wastrel. One's affiliations with or rejection of Chatterton was indicative of one's broader aesthetic vision.⁵³

Encouraged by the publication of two major biographies of Chatterton—Daniel Wilson's in 1869 and David Masson's in 1874—and new editions of his works, a small group of devotees adopted the young poet, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Rossetti's close friend and literary executor Theodore Watts (later known as Watts-Dunton), Swinburne, and finally Oscar Wilde—who lectured on Chatterton in 1886 and 1888, who campaigned to preserve Chatterton's birthplace in Bristol, and who maintained an extensive notebook on Chatterton. With a complete rejection of all artistic agency and a refusal to own his labor, Chatterton's Rowley conceit trumps the earlier claims of James Macpherson and Horace Walpole that they translated found stories, and trumps later Romantic disavowals, such as Coleridge's note to “Kubla Kahn” and Mary Shelley's introduction to *Frankenstein*, where the authors figure themselves as merely the transcribers of works that arrived to their imaginations fully formed. Rejecting the authorship of his Rowley poems entirely, Chatterton elided any claims to artistic agency other than luck.

Whatever the literary-philosophical ideas of Chatterton, his looks—as rendered by Wallis—had an unmistakable impact on the development of Aestheticism: Chatterton's figure was appropriated by George Du Maurier to typify the aesthete, linking physical indolence with the trappings of lush medievalism and eighteenth-century attire. It is now well established that the satires inaugurated by Du Maurier shaped the fashion and mannerisms of the Aesthetes far more

⁵¹ “Review of Edward Young's *Pre-Raffaellism*,” *New Quarterly* 6, no. 22 (April 1857): 221.

⁵² “Chatterton,” *Saturday Review* 87 (21 January 1899): 85-86; 85.

⁵³ For a fuller discussion of this dynamic, see Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

than the fashion and mannerisms of the Aesthetes shaped Du Maurier's satires.⁵⁴ This widely-known version of Aestheticism—embodied by the lily-gazing fop who affected medievalism—coalesced in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Chatterton had affected medievalism a century before through his Rowley poems, and the “puce-colored breeches or dainty stockings” of his own time offered a sartorial model for future aspirants. Gilbert and Sullivan's parodic high water mark, *Patience* (1881), also depicts aesthetic invention as a version of Chatterton's efforts. The poet Bunthorne is as much Chatterton as he is Wilde, wearing knee breeches and slippers and admitting that he is “an aesthetic sham” whose “air severe / Is but a mere / Veneer!” and whose “mediaevalism's affectation / Born of a morbid love of admiration!”⁵⁵ But it is Du Maurier's *Punch* cartoons where the impact of Wallis's painting is most clear. “Love-Agony” (*figure 3*), published in June 1880, draws from Du Maurier's stock family of Aesthetic nincompoops: the poet Jellaby Postlethwaite's verse is accompanied by an image of a toga-wearing man lying at the edge of a pond, depicted in an image “[designed] by Maudle” (Du Maurier's satirical Aesthetic painter).
 [insert figure 3 about here]

If the image recalls Narcissus, it is worth noting that the figure is not looking into the water to see his reflection, but his head is tossed back, the curls of his longish hair plainly rendered. Du Maurier's caption indicates that Postlethwaite “is also said to have sat for the Picture.”⁵⁶ Just as the figure's supine pose recalls Wallis's Chatterton, surely too this caption brings the 1856 canvas to mind: poet George Meredith famously posed for Wallis's painting, and his wife left him for the painter, adding an extra layer of pathos to the image.⁵⁷ Six months after “Love-Agony,” Du Maurier repeated the pose in “Fleurs des Alpes; Or, Postlethwaite's Last Love” (*figure 4*), in which the poet appears again reclined, again forlorn, again with head thrown back, though this time fully clothed in aesthetic attire including black slippers like those worn by Chatterton.

[insert figure 4 about here]

⁵⁴ See Waleska Schwandt, “Oscar Wilde and the Stereotype of the Aesthete: An Investigation into the Prerequisites of Wilde's Aesthetic Self Fashioning,” in *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar: Versions of Wilde during the Last 100 Years*, ed. Uwe Boker, Richard Corballis and Julie A. Hibbard (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002): 91-102; Ruth Temple, “Truth in Labeling: Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, Decadence, Fin-de-Siècle,” *English Literature in Transition* 17 (1974): 201-222; and Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ W. S. Gilbert, *Patience, Or, Bunthorne's Bride!* (London: Chappell, 1882), 13-14.

⁵⁶ George Du Maurier, “A Love-Agony,” *Punch* 5 June 1880, 254.

⁵⁷ Like much of Du Maurier's aesthetic satires, those mimicking Wallis's “Chatterton” pose simultaneously endorse and send up the original. In light of Du Maurier's belief that “artistic legitimacy should be perceived as the result of genius being brought to the fore through strenuous training,” it is worth noting that he acknowledged the work of others who had undergone such training; Wallis, like Du Maurier, studied painting in Paris. Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody 1840-1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76.

The eighteenth-century costume of knee breeches, the limpness implied by the body position, and the attending implications of character (egotistic and false, if gifted; lazy, if talented) of Wallis's Chatterton became fixed, perpetuated by these satires and by Wilde himself in costume for his American lecture tour. Performed indolence and a relaxed, still body became irrevocably associated first with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and then with the Aesthete, in direct contradistinction to the visually discernable—if equally performed—manual labor of the navy.

Affecting Anything: Wilde's Performance of Labor

Chatterton represented far more than simply a look, however. The imaginative creation at the heart of Chatterton's Rowley project, along with the poetic innovation of the Rowley poems, gained increasing esteem among his followers. Just as a Carlylean sense of labor can be attributed to the persistence of stories, so too can Wilde's protestations of ease be understand as the outcome of narratives, in this case cannily self-defined creation stories; regarding the artist himself as a site of productive narrative-making sheds light on Wilde's own self-fashioning practices. At least from his days at Oxford, Wilde demonstrated his savvy in controlling the performance of his labor. His letters abound with protestations of laziness, though evidence from his notebooks—not to mention his extraordinary academic performance—belies those claims.⁵⁸ If he disclaimed his dutiful academic studies, he nonetheless embraced performing a different kind of work at Oxford. Like many acolytes of Ruskin, Wilde joined the ill-fated Hinksey Road project, a social amelioration effort that saw Wilde acting as an actual navy, building a road to connect Hinksey with its neighboring town. Despite its ultimate failure, the project drew considerable attention, driving home the idea that the optics of work were as important, if not more important, than the object of one's efforts. In one of his American lectures, Wilde exploited the story, admitting that the project came to nothing ("And what became of the road? Well, like a bad lecture it ended abruptly—in the middle of the swamp") but deftly linking his project of aesthetic education with Ruskin's attempt at community improvement via road-building.⁵⁹ When in the mid 1880s Wilde joined the Chatterton revival, lecturing and maintaining an extensive notebook on the young poet, he located Chatterton's imaginative power in his facility for biographical and poetical invention. In

⁵⁸ Letters from Wilde's years at Oxford are replete with protestations of laziness. Yet after insisting to one friend that he was "reading hard for a Fourth in Greats," he actually pulled off a rare double first. *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 61.

⁵⁹ Oscar Wilde, "Art and the Handicraftsman," in *Miscellanies*, ed. Robert Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), 307. Wilde continues: "I felt that if there was enough spirit amongst the young men to go out to such work as road-making for the sake of a noble ideal of life, I could from them create an artistic movement that might change, as it has changed, the face of England." Ross prepared this version of Wilde's lecture based on Wilde's annotated manuscript

his notebook, Wilde transcribes a quotation directly from Chatterton and notes its importance: “a great genius can affect anything.”⁶⁰ This self-declared mutability is at odds with the Chatterton described by Carlyle, with his inherent constitutional weakness.

Wilde’s self-fashioning as high Aesthetic priest was made all the easier by Du Maurier’s Postlethwaite, as is clear from the number of writers who unquestionably associated the poet with the caricature: in January 1881 the *Liverpool Mercury* referred to Wilde as “Mr. du Maurier’s Postlethwaite”;⁶¹ that July the *Derby Daily Telegraph* labelled him “the original ‘Postlethwaite’ of Du Maurier’s sketches in *Punch*”;⁶² and that November the *Leicester Chronicle* noted that Wilde “[had] a wider fame as ‘Postlethwaite.’”⁶³ If pundits accepted too readily a Du-Maurieresque vision of Wilde, the writer himself did little to discourage such conclusions. In a sense, Wilde inverts Bunthorne’s performance, shamming indolence rather than agonized effort. One tour du force performance was played out in letters to the editors of *The Scots Observer* regarding *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Responding to a critic’s review, Wilde offers a “correction”: “[Mr. Whibley] ends his letter with the statement that I have been indefatigable in my public appreciation of my own work. I have no doubt that in saying this he means to pay me a compliment, but he really overrates my capacity, as well as my inclination for work. I must frankly confess that, by nature and by choice, I am extremely indolent.... Cultivated idleness seems to me the proper occupation for man.”⁶⁴ Wilde’s phrase “cultivated idleness” was itself a sly acknowledgement of the corpus of literature that preceded him, a subtle (and easily overlooked) indicator of studied labor.⁶⁵

Wilde’s public would, by 1891/2, likely have needed little convincing. Much like Carlyle’s doctrine of labor ultimately overtook his works, Wilde’s doctrine of indolence overtook the evidence of his industry. Early responses to his 1881 *Poems* complained of falseness in terms that might just as well have been said about Chatterton: “he is a lute which sings other men’s songs”;

⁶⁰ Wilde, “Chatterton” notebook, 77^r; reprinted in Bristow and Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde’s Chatterton*, 405. The quotation comes from Chatterton’s “Last Will and Testament.”

⁶¹ “Our London Correspondence,” *Liverpool Mercury* 13 July 1881, 5.

⁶² “From Our London Correspondent,” *Derby Daily Telegraph* 13 January 1881, 4.

⁶³ “Our London Letter,” *Leicester Chronicle and Leicestershire Mercury* 12 November 1881, 5.

⁶⁴ Oscar Wilde, “Art and Morality,” *Scots Observer* 4, no. 91 (16 August 1890): 332-333; 332.

⁶⁵ One precedent for the quip is Horace’s “strenua inertia” (*Epistles: Book I*, ed. Roland Mayer [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994], 11.28). The phrase “strenuous idleness” was popularized by Edward Young’s *The Complaint: Or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742-1745): “A soul immortal, spending all her fires, / Wasting her strength in strenuous idleness” (“Night the First,” *Scots Magazine* 5 [February 1743]: 75). Wordsworth adopts the phrase in “This Lawn, a carpet all alive” (II.6) and *The Prelude* (4.378). Carlyle borrows it from Wordsworth (e.g. *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle: Volume 1: 1812-1821*, ed. Charles Sanders [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1970], 338). Wilde’s substitution of “cultivated” for “strenuous” suggests both deliberateness and an invocation of Arnoldian sense of “culture.”

“he gives us a fashionable sham, instead of reality.”⁶⁶ Also typical is the recuperation of the pre-Carlylean—that is to say, Romantic—idea that the “genius” figure (whose creations require mere inspiration instead of labor) is antithetical to the worker: “Oscar Wilde has all the fickleness which proverb has assigned to poets and other geniuses who are privileged to wear long hair and sneer at the working world.”⁶⁷ Others deny that he performed any brainwork at all: “The trouble with Oscar is that his poems are made up of un-think thoughts.”⁶⁸ Many of those who sought to defend Wilde predicated their approbation on his promise, which could only be realized by his ceasing leisure and embracing work: one wrote with backhanded praise that Wilde had “an excellence chance, if he chooses to settle down to serious work, and the patient exercise of his undoubted talents, of becoming, like the Thane of Cawdor, a prosperous gentleman.”⁶⁹ Once established, this narrative proved difficult to dislodge. When Wilde took on the tiring schedule of his American lecture tour, the announcement was met with skepticism, as summed up in the *London Daily News*, “the general belief is that it will be a failure.”⁷⁰ Still later, when in 1887 Wilde took on the role of editor of the *Lady’s World*, soon to be renamed under his leadership as the *Woman’s World*, many critics noted that this move marked the end of years of lassitude—an unfair comment given that that time between the publication of *Poems* and his editorship had been spent on seemingly unending lecture tours of the US and the British isles along with an intensive program of writing for the periodical press.⁷¹ One critic in the *Star* commented on the weight-loss supposedly spurred by the sudden movement from laziness into effort: “Since Oscar Wilde has left the quiet waters of idleness for the troubled currents of editorship he has grown thin, not to say wasted.”⁷² The *Western Daily Press* hoped “that Messrs Cassell’s admirable publication will not forsake its healthy and sprightly tone at the dictation of its new editor”—apparently concerned that it would be overcome by a Wildean aestheticism that sought to “convert the world into a vast sepulchre in which vivid colours and human freshness were to be interred for all time come”—and hoped that Wilde realized “that the average Philistine is likely to make a far more useful

⁶⁶ “Our London Correspondence,” *Liverpool Mercury* 13 July 1881, 5.

⁶⁷ “From Our London Correspondents,” *Newcastle Courant* 9 December 1881, 2.

⁶⁸ “Jottings,” *Aberdeen Evening Express* 24 September 1881, 4.

⁶⁹ “From the *World*,” quoted in the *Hampshire Advertiser* 20 August 1881, 7.

⁷⁰ “The United States,” *London Daily News* 19 December 1881, 5.

⁷¹ The recently-published sixth and seventh volumes of the Oxford English Texts edition of Wilde’s works include over 120 periodical publications between 1883 and 1890. *Journalism Part I* and *Journalism Part II*, ed. John Stokes and Mark W. Turner, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vols. 6 and 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷² “Gossip, Mainly about Other People,” *Evening Telegraph* 16 March 1888, 2. The piece was widely reprinted, including “Oscar Wilde as an Editor” (*Aberdeen Evening Express* 17 March 1888, 2) and “Oscar Wilde Growing Thin” (*Huddersfield Chronicle* 16 March 1888, 4).

member of society than the person who succumbs the idle and grotesque rhapsodies with which Bunthorne has made us familiar.”⁷³

For Victorian critics, the idea of “cultivated idleness” was ridiculous unless its application meant that Wilde would cease to write, and thus cease inflicting his works on a horrified readership. A respondent to Wilde’s *Scots Observer* letter wrote in protest to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that “Indolence may be the least doleful misuse of [Wilde’s] own time on earth that he can achieve; but does that prove conclusively that ‘cultivated indolence’ is the ‘proper occupation’ of say a Shakespeare or a Moliere⁷⁴ It is worth nothing that the writer misquotes Wilde’s “cultivated idleness”—which describes a momentary state—with “cultivated indolence”—which describes a constitutional quality. The comment also recalls Carlyle’s assessment of Chatterton as having “something wrong in the original conformation of him” as well as Carlyle’s remark in the same letter that “one has a feeling that perhaps this thrice-miserable death at that early stage may have been the least miserable ending for him.”⁷⁵

Not all were oblivious to Wilde’s canny control over his public persona. “One thing is certain,” a writer for the *Hampshire Telegraph* concluded: “[Wilde] has carefully sounded the capacity of the British and American publics for swallowing humbug, and feeds them according. Tomfoolery is the fashion, and he plays the fool.”⁷⁶ Fooled or not, for those who embraced Aestheticism, the appearance of ease was an indicator of artistic talent and even merit. One newspaper reporter who interviewed Wilde reported that “his appearance suggested the idea of indolence or ennui; but it was the abstraction of a thoughtful mind, rather than the inertia of a vacant one that produced the result. . . . The most important action of a poetic mind consists in absolute passivity—a complete abandonment of the soul to the inspiration of chance or surrounding influences.”⁷⁷ But these were lonely voices, and nowhere is the naturalization of Wilde’s performance more clear than in the response to his 1895 trial for committing “acts of gross indecency with other male persons.” In addition to frequently framing Wilde’s homosexuality itself as a triumph of indulgence and indolence over self-control and discipline, many writers connected these traits to Wilde’s supposedly limited artistic output. Rowland Strong wrote upon Wilde’s release in 1897, that the draconian sentence of two years of hard labor would in fact improve Wilde’s artistry: “With his abilities, he ought to do great and lasting work, and what seemed at first an unnecessarily harsh sentence has probably won back to literature an intelligence which was wasting itself in indolent luxuriousness. Art will now be all the richer in that

⁷³ “Topics of the Day,” *Western Daily Press* 5 July 1887, 5.

⁷⁴ Walter Whyte, “Art and Morality,” *Scots Observer* 4, no. 92 (23 August 1890): 356-357; 357.

⁷⁵ Carlyle, Letter to Daniel Wilson, 10 January 1870. British Library, Add. MS 47867.

⁷⁶ “London Gossip,” *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* 16 August 1882, 3.

⁷⁷ Percival Almy, “New Views of Oscar Wilde,” *The Theatre* 23 (March 1894): 119-127; 119-120.

this artist has regained possession, not merely of his liberty, but of himself.”⁷⁸ This view is governed by the idea that effective art is produced only through labor and discipline, in the absence of which talent can only “waste itself.” And by this logic, the cruelty of Wilde’s sentence is transmogrified into a productive means of correcting bad writing habits.

Later writing would further naturalize indolence as an inherent fault of Wilde’s character. Arthur Ransome concludes his early biography of Wilde by noting that “Wilde was indolent and knew it. Indolence was, perhaps, the only sin that stared him in the face as he lay dying, for it was the only one that he had committed with a bad conscience,” suggesting that Wilde could have overcome his indolence if he so chose.⁷⁹ In a 1910 reflection on Wilde’s life for the *Fortnightly Review*, scholar and librarian Arundell Esdaile placed self-indulgence as one of Wilde’s inherent traits, describing him as “a man of strong passions and a weak will, who while still quite young had found this philosophic sanction for a self-indulgence that came naturally to him. Years of indolence and extravagance ... further weakened his moral fibre.”⁸⁰ Ten years later, a reviewer of Frank Harris’s biography further pathologized Wilde constitution: “there was in [Wilde] a paralysis of the finer springs of control. His gluttony, his sloth, his helpless self-indulgence...reveal in the man a fundamental incapacity for self-discipline. And an artist who is to achieve work of permanent value must discipline himself.”⁸¹ (Doubtless these criticisms weren’t discouraged by the publication of the expurgated version of his letter from jail, *De Profundis*, which placed outsized emphasis on Wilde’s moments of regret, decoupling his claims of indolence from their intimate connection with his lover Bosie’s presence.) Such comments regard Wilde’s accounts of his creative process not a controlled performance that is consistent with the art he produced, but instead as a symptom of his constitutional deficiency. In turn, that deficiency was cited in indictments of the relative merit of his literary output.

Yet creative agency for the Aesthetes, in contrast, was never grounded in the rejection of the labor or effort required to produce their artworks; their aesthetic expanded to include the persona of the creator as a site for invention and self-fashioning, and it was in this context that they mediated representations of their work process. With the revived Chatterton as a visual and textual touchstone, writers from the mid nineteenth century carved out a version of artistic agency that embraced the performance of ease. As I have worked to show, the Carlylean laborer was equally mediated, a product of the consolidation of a self-defined creative process filtered through the repetitions and simplifications of mass media. His model, the “brawny, broad-shouldered” navy

⁷⁸ Rowland Strong, “Oscar Wilde’s Condition and Plans for Work,” *New York Times* 12 June 1897, rba1.

⁷⁹ Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912), 211.

⁸⁰ Esdaile, “New Hellenism,” 717.

⁸¹ J. M. Murry, “Oscar Wilde as Tragic Hero,” *Athenaeum* 4717 (24 September 1920): 401-402; 402.

of Brown's painting, rendered labor plainly visible and its ends hard earned. Reconsidering these conceptions of artistic agency as creation narratives chips away at their ossification as fact and complicates the view that labor played a unilateral role in nineteenth-century art, essentially influencing high Victorian works while missing entirely from Aesthetic artistic production.

To wit, I conclude with a final example of the truly tangled interrelations of Carlylean and Aesthetic creation. Wilde had grown up reading Carlyle—a connection traceable to his mother, who maintained a correspondence with the author—and could quote from his works at length. But Wilde's investment in Carlyle's writing process was even more personal. In February 1888, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that Carlyle's bookshelves were available for purchase, but that "any hero-worshipper, in want of a bookcase" had "no time to lose: for Mr. Oscar Wilde...was already after the shelves."⁸² It seems that Wilde did not purchase the shelves, but as Esdaile notes in the epigraph of this essay, after his stint in Paris in the early 1890s, "on Wilde's return to London he bought the table at which Carlyle had written his *French Revolution*."⁸³ This desk—ostensibly the site of the tortured toil Carlyle described in "Table Talk"—comes to function as a kind of totem to labor, and its treatment at the hands of Wilde's contemporaries reflects his reception and Carlyle's legacy. Likely following Robert Sherard's 1905 biography of Wilde, Esdaile ascribed Wilde's interest in the desk to "a vain and pathetic hope... to stir himself by those outward observance into literary industry."⁸⁴ Such characterizations depended on ignoring Wilde's prolific output of 1890-1895, which was apparently insufficient for Esdaile to count as "literary industry." In any case, when Wilde's household effects were auctioned to pay debts after his trial, Carlyle's desk, which "formed part of the furniture of Oscar Wilde's study," fetched 14½ guineas.⁸⁵ Also included in the sale were artworks by Whistler, numerous first edition and presentation copies of books by literary luminaries, and manuscripts by Wilde himself, but the desk was termed "the chief curio offered for sale" and "the most interesting thing sold at the dispersion of Oscar Wilde's effects."⁸⁶ Even this tenuous connection that linked Wilde's writing practices with those of Carlyle came

⁸² "Literary Notes and Echoes," *Pall Mall Gazette* 25 February 1888, 3.

⁸³ Esdaile, "New Hellenism," 717.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ "Oscar Wilde's Effects," *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* 24 April 1895, 2. One paper reported that £14 bought the "wondrous piece of mechanism in furniture," but the price of 14½ guineas is widely quoted elsewhere ("Sale of Wilde's Household Goods," *Advertiser for Somerset* 2 May 1895, 10). A hand-annotated copy of the sale catalogue held at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library lists the price as "£14.14.0." Bullock (London), *Catalogue of the Library of Valuable Books, Pictures, Portraits of Celebrities, Arundel Society Prints, Household Furniture, Carlyle's Writing Table, Chippendale and Italian Chairs, Old Persian Carpets and Rugs...which will be sold by auction, by Mr. Bullock, on the presides, on Wednesday, April 24th, 1895, at one o'clock* (London: privately printed, 1895). William Andrews Clark Memorial Library Shelfmark PR5828 C357.

⁸⁶ "The Oscar Wilde Case," *Manchester Weekly Times* 26 April 1895, 7; "Our London Correspondence," *Glasgow Herald* 25 April 1895, 7.

under attack when the desk's provenance was questioned. The *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* reports that "a member of Carlyle's family" protested that "only one 'writing-table' which had belonged to or been used by Thomas Carlyle [had] ever passed out of the possession of the family," and it was accounted for.⁸⁷ Carlyle's family speculated that the desk sold from Wilde's house "may have belonged to Thomas Carlyle's nephew, Mr. Alexander Carlyle."⁸⁸ After noting the controversy over the desk's provenance, the *Freeman's Journal* restores some balance to the episode with a simple equalizing rhetorical gesture: "anyhow the purchaser of a sensation has got very good value for his 14 ½ guineas. If it weren't the writing table of Mr. Thomas Carlyle, it was unquestionably the writing table of Mr. Oscar Wilde."⁸⁹

⁸⁷ "Chit-Chat," *Sheffield Evening Telegraph* 7 May 1895, 2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ "A Somewhat Interesting Controversy," *Freeman's Journal* 8 Wednesday 1895, 4.