Anatomising the Life of the Artist: *The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H.* and Modern Biographic Fiction

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Abstract
This paper focuses on Oscar Wilde's literary treatment of the history of Willie Hughes as both a model for modern fictionalised biographies and the heir of a specifically British tradition of life writing, which is tackled here from a double perspective. On the one hand, *The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H.* will be discussed in terms of its diegetic nature, expanding on its ties with Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* and experiments in fictional biography. On the other, Wilde's text will be scrutinised from a non-fictional perspective that aims to throw light on its possible links with eighteenth- and, even more interestingly, seventeenth-century forms of human-life 'dissection' that had Samuel Johnson and Robert Burton among their forerunners.

Key-words: Oscar Wilde, life writing, late-nineteenth-century short fiction, Walter Pater, imaginary portrait, anatomy.

1. *The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H.* as a form of creative life writing

Since its first publication in 1889, Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." has raised issues regarding the reception of its content, its formal and generic classification, and its publishing history[1].

[1] With reference to this last point, in the eighth volume of the recent Oxford edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Ian Small takes into account two works: a) *The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H.* (Wilde [1921] 2017: 197-258), corresponding to the enlarged book-length version, first published posthumously by Mitchell Kennerley but originally meant to appear after Wilde's revisions and additions in the mid-1890s (pp. lxviii-lxix); b) "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (Wilde [1889] 2017: 259-281). The latter was the shorter version included in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in July 1889. The present paper considers the longer version,

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Matters are complicated further by the self-referential nature of a text underpinned by an astounding intersection of historical and literary echoes, hybridised elements, and hermeneutic as well as aesthetic paradigms (Giovannelli 2003: 141). At its basic level, Wilde's frame story focuses on three Victorian men – the unnamed first-person narrator, George Erskine, and the late Cyril Graham – who alternatively set out to find clues for a novel interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* that might uncover the true identity of the elusive 'Mr. W.H.' This person is of course the 'Onlie Begetter' of the poems, as one reads in the famously cryptic dedication from the 1609 edition of the *Sonnets*. Beyond this basic level, "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." is a work capable of stimulating various reflections on the projection of real and imaginary lives into fiction writing (see Jacobs 1990).

As fiction studies have progressively shown a renewed interest in biographical forms, Wilde's contributions to a lineage of literary works that have placed individual lives at their centre merit assessment. Before commenting further on the specificity of this tradition, I underscore that the present analysis discusses and singles out the possible genre affiliations of *Mr. W.H.* by broadly discerning between a *fictional* and a *non-fictional* sphere. In so doing, I refer to Hermione Lee's twin definitions of biography drawing on two metaphorical poles that are commonly used to describe biographical writing: one is "autopsy" (through which I point out the non-fictional nature of *Mr. W.H.*) and the other is "portrait" (here relied upon to discuss its fictional features):

> Whereas autopsy suggests a clinical investigation and, even, a violation, portrait suggests empathy, bringing to life, capturing the character. The portrait stimulates warmth, energy, idiosyncrasy, and personality through attention to detail and skill in representation. Yet these two metaphors do have something in common. Portraits taken from life and posthumous autopsies both make an investigation of the subject which will shape how posterity views them. Both must pay precise attention to detail. Both can be revelatory. (Lee 2009)

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hereafter abbreviated as *Mr. W.H.* For a detailed reconstruction of the publishing history of "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.", see Schroeder (1984) and, for a rationale regarding my choice, Small (2014: 378ff).

This comment is particularly appropriate for a text like *Mr. W.H.* because, as has often been observed, Wilde's Shakespearean 'extravaganza' was received by nineteenth-century readers as a contribution, no matter how idiosyncratic, to Shakespeare criticism (Stokes 2003). Although the latest studies of biographical fiction, such as Lackey's (2017), almost unanimously refer to Wilde's Shakespearean tale as a landmark for a vital mode of generic intermingling, I will maintain here a double perspective – that is to say, a distinction between the fictional and factual poles.

This said, when it comes to theorists of fictionalised forms of biography, Wilde's life-writing experiment does not seem to be taken into consideration. As a matter of fact, thinking of the so-called 'biografiction' (see Castellana 2019), it should be kept in mind that this was more of a continental literary trend, with Marcel Schwob, the author of *Vies imaginaires* (1896), standing among its path-breaking forerunners. Yet, Schwob's approach did have an Anglocentric bent, as testified to by his volume's Preface, originally published in *The New Review* in 1896. In it he discussed the import of John Aubrey's *Brief Lives* and James Boswell's *Life of Johnson.* Schwob also pointed to the supposed shortcomings of both authors. In his view, Aubrey showed too little concern with the intellectual achievements of his subjects, while Boswell's work was definitely too long. Schwob then proceeded to lay down an ideal form of biography as a genre that, "like some inferior deity […] should select unique individuals from the realm of human material available" (Schwob [1896] 1924: 20). The French writer's late-Romantic thrust induced him to highlight uniqueness and authenticity in the individual as a counteraction to the realistic and naturalistic approaches, much in line with Wilde's positions in "The Decay of Lying".

As a result, the goal of Schwob's ideal biographer borders on the fictional: only art could offer a proper portrait of individuals since it "desires only the unique" (Schwob [1896] 1924: 8). This element certainly runs through Wilde's *Mr. W.H.*, a tale that brings a 'new Shakespeare' to the fore, together with a rich metabiographical apparatus, including other characters and historical figures. Schwob's interest in English life writing, which was accompanied by his fertile career as a translator[2], might thus lay the groundwork

[2] It should be noted that Schwob actively cooperated to the dissemination of Wilde's *oeuvre* in France, for instance by translating "The Selfish Giant" as early

for a re-orientation of biographical fiction belonging to a late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century international tradition. This tradition includes works by famous authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Danilo Kiš, Pierre Michon, and Antonio Tabucchi, and has an eye to Anglophone roots. In this sense, Wilde's text could be seen as an offspring of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British tradition of biographical writing that Schwob was carefully perusing and studying.

Within this framework, *Mr. W.H.* might have constituted a basis for, or at least have marked a significant step towards, the future evolutions that biography as an art would undergo in the early twentieth century, with the revolutionary turn of the "New Biography" style promoted by Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey (see Marcus 2002). Wilde is possibly a crucial connective gear in the 'intellectual machinery' of twentieth-century biography, as his engagement with an imaginary search for the identity of a mysterious historical character surely enters a "generic region where factual and fictional narratives come into closest proximity" (Cohn 1999: 18). Wilde's essayistic tale also covers the literary theme of the life of the artist, thus envisaging a further signpost within the development of the *Bildungsroman* throughout the twentieth century. In other words, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does not stand alone in Wilde's contributions to a genre that hinges on the topic and potentialities of portraiture, "anchor[ing] the inner life of the protagonist to the autobiographical real" and "conveying something of the immediacy and intimacy of the creator's lived experience", ultimately moving closer to "self-portraiture" (Castle 2019: 153). Indeed, Wilde's writings stand out as some of the most powerful examples Modernist authors could have turned to for an "aesthetic rendition" of individual lives (Murray 1989: xi). Even canonical texts such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) might be said to bear visible marks of Wilde's figurative choices (Kershner 1978).

Wilde's contribution to this tradition is less conspicuous than Henry James's. Yet both of them shared – among other things – a flair for developing the theme of an artist's or writer's career within

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as 1891. Schwob also translated Thomas De Quincey's *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant* (1827), a crucial example of fictional biography that Wilde himself had most probably in mind when dwelling on his own creation.

their works, including short fiction. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, they both relished enhancing the mysteries of such fictional lives, according to a dynamic that could be ascribed to an "epistemology of the closet"[3]. James's stories gravitating around writers are imbued with a desire to decipher the protagonists' private lives, a process that James himself, in his prefatory words to "The Figure in the Carpet", described with the tellingly sensual term "penetration"[4]. In that 1896 novella, Hugh Vereker, not too differently from Wilde's Mr. W.H., remains an irreducibly elusive artist figure, arguably paving the way for the twentieth-century structuralist and post-structuralist theorisations of such a concept.

2. At the interface between a biographical short story and an 'imaginary portrait'

Let us now delve into Wilde's play with genres from a diegetic point of view, also considering the fact that *Mr. W.H.* had first been published as a story in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1889. Although late-nineteenth-century British short stories have been grouped under different labels, the one which best resonates with a special interest in the artist's projection into a character seems to be "aesthetic fiction" (Harris 1979: 74).

It was again Henry James who provided a vivid assessment of short-fiction writing at the end of the nineteenth century. While censoring the "blank misery of our Anglo-Saxon sense of

[3] The well-known eponymous study by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick aims to investigate the sociopolitical process of silencing homosexual desires through an epistemological frame that draws on the image of the closet as a metaphor for secret (homosexual) relationships. In particular, her discussion of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" circles around the friction between a public acceptance of 'discreet' homosexual networks that do not threaten heterosexual hierarchies and a sort of "homosexual panic" that "lurch[es] toward a brutal, virilizing disavowal" of such liaisons (Sedgwick 1990: 182).

[4] See a longer excerpt: "What I most remember of my proper process is the lively impulse, at the root of it, to reinstate analytic appreciation, by some ironic or fantastic stroke, so far as possible, in its virtually forfeited rights and dignities. Importunate to this end had I long found the charming idea of some artist whose most characteristic intention, or cluster of intentions, should have taken all vainly for granted the public, or at the worst the not unthinkable private, exercise of penetration" (James 1937: 228).

such matters" and "the general indifference to this fine style of composition", he acknowledged the rewards of "the beautiful and blest [*sic*] *nouvelle*" as a prose form best suited to "handle the threads of life" (James 1937: 220, 59). Quite similarly, according to G.K. Chesterton, the appeal of short fiction on readers drew on a feeling of "fleetingness and fragility" capable of suggesting how "human existence is only a dream" enveloped in "the irrevocable beauty of a falsehood" (Chesterton 1906: 69). Simply put, human life can be said to be captured here through the lens of its inherent impressionism (Hunter 2007: 9).

Another important name to cite is of course that of Walter Pater, who contributed even more to shaping the nineteenth-century aesthetics of short fiction from a stylistic and theoretical point of view. There is little doubt that his *Imaginary Portraits*[5] represented a crucial step in this evolution and combination of genres, lying "at the intersection of autobiography, biography, the short-story, myth, the history of art, of ideas, of manners, of events" (Ascari 1999: 98). This was a new typology of writing that significantly differed from, say, the traditional Renaissance model comprising a sequence of biographical portraits (a format that was still relevant for the otherwise disruptive *Eminent Victorians*, 1918, by Lytton Strachey). Although authoritative antecedents like Walter Savage Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-1829) can be easily discerned (Saunders 2010: 39), Pater's cycle of short narratives opened the doors to a new form. The experiment thus carried out is described by Max Saunders as one of the most important influences on the Modernist aesthetics of the self, as it provocatively and ingeniously blurred traditional boundaries between the factual domain and the potentialities of imaginative reconstruction. Quite significantly, Pater was aware that his portraits might be read as forgeries "designed to exemplify the views he was formulating" (Saunders 2010: 47).

Employing an historical perspective, Elisa Bizzotto has examined and contextualised Pater's output as developing at the junction of three canonical paths, i.e. the proto-aesthetic novella, the critical-biographical mode, and autobiography (Bizzotto 2002: 218-219). Her

[5] In 1887 Pater decided to collect "A Prince of Court Painters" (1885), "Denys l'Auxerrois" (1886), "Sebastian Van Storck" (1886), and "Duke Carl of Rosenmold" (1887) in a single volume.

insights are based on a definition of 'imaginary portrait' given by Pater himself to George Grove in a letter of 17 April 1878, where he commented on "The Child in the House" as a work of fiction (as clearly hinted by the adjective 'imaginary') as well as the fruit of his expertise as an art critic. Here Pater seems to capitalise on both "generic interrelation" and "artistic hybridization" (Bizzotto 2002: 214). And these last two features do connect Pater's experiment with Wilde's subsequent creative endeavours at the threshold of imaginative fiction and factual biography: *Mr. W.H.* carved out a middle ground between the wordily experience of biography and the iconic effect of portraiture. As Pater in turn noted in his review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the novel's "interest turns on that very old theme, old because based on some inherent experience or fancy of the human brain, of a double life: of Doppelgänger – not of two persons, in this case, but of the man and his portrait" (Pater [1891] 1971: 145).

To better appreciate Pater's achievement, one should recall what has been considered as the unofficial manifesto of his biographic fiction. In a brief text entitled "Diaphaneitè", which he read to the Oxford University's Old Mortality Society in February 1864, he called for an ideal portrait of an "elusive type of personality – one who is neither artist, nor saint, nor revolutionary, nor anything else that can be classified" (Monsman 1998: 100):

> It does not take the eye by breadth of colour; rather it is that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world's life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades, which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character – delicate provision in the organization of the moral world for the transmission to every part of it of the life quickened at single points! (Pater 2014: 77-78)

Pater sets the 'gemlike flame' which animates his peculiarly ex-centric and diaphanous torchbearer against the muscular vehemence and strong assertiveness of a hero such as the one hailed by Thomas Carlyle. The figure is the prototype for his aesthetic ideal of a subject in fiction (Monsman 1971).

Wilde was surely fascinated by Pater's literary and artistic rendering of characters (Evangelista 2006: 239) and, although

"Diaphaneitè" would only be published posthumously in 1895, he could have learned first-hand by reading the 1885-1887 series of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*. In his review of the collected volume, he praised the fact that the evident intellectual value of such portraits, which marked them off as "philosophic studies", was suitably "tempered by personality" (Wilde [1887] 1980: 163). Hence, Wilde evaluated Pater as "the greatest artist in prose", able to craft "a style that aims at perfection of form, that seeks to produce its effect by artistic means, and that sets before itself an ideal of grave and chastened beauty" (p. 165).

3. The interconnections with the biographical essay and the 'autopsy'

As anticipated in the first paragraph, *Mr. W.H.* can also be appraised as a non-fictional piece of writing. Its engagement with Shakespeare criticism and with an exegetical approach to the *Sonnets* at large is self-evident and constitutes the core of the text itself. Wilde interlaces a highly personal and idiosyncratic reading of Shakespeare's collection with references to critical authorities such as Thomas Tyler, William Minto, and John Addington Symonds. Wilde also penned a critical essay devoted to "Shakespeare and Stage Costume", which had originally appeared in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1885 and was later included in *Intentions* (1891) with the title of "The Truth of Masks". He thus showed his skills in dealing with literary history issues about the English Bard. Moreover, Wilde's historiographic and critical aim is clearly stated in a letter of April 1889 to the editor of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (Wilde 2000: 398).

Although an important issue *per se*, I assess here the relevance of Wilde's partaking in Shakespeare criticism through the filter of *Mr. W.H.*'s hybrid texture and Wilde's bent for interweaving critical observations and essayistic musings. As to the argumentative structure, the story begins in the present, with Erskine and the unnamed homodiegetic narrator enjoying an idle after-dinner chat. Before long, we come across the first essayistic debate on critical interpretations of Shakespeare's sonnets, followed by a vivid sketch of Cyril Graham (an imaginary character, like the other two interlocutors). When introducing Cyril's whimsical thesis,

Erskine proceeds to make a clean sweep of former well-known theories about the *Sonnets*' dedicatee, commonly identified with historical personages such as the Earl of Pembroke and the Earl of Southampton (Wilde [1921] 2017: 202-203). Just after this provocative preamble, Wilde has his characters voice what can be regarded as a core assumption about Shakespeare's poetical art. This art is a secondary activity within the parable of a dramaturgical *Bildung*: "[The] art of which Shakespeare talks in the Sonnets is not the art of the Sonnets themselves, which indeed were to him but slight and secret things – it is the art of the dramatist to which he is always alluding" (p. 204).

Erskine continues by illustrating the main postulate of Cyril's reading, along with its essayistic imprint. Cyril's contention that the 'Mr. W.H.' mentioned in the dedication leaf of the 1609 quarto of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* was a boy actor named 'Willie Hughes', to whom the playwright was erotically attracted, is based on an emotionally-laden and self-referential intuition. This subjective stance is highlighted further – and paradoxically – when the pivotal piece of evidence supporting it, a presumed portrait of Willie Hughes himself, is exposed as a forgery. By his own admission, Graham's conception of Hughes as a talented Renaissance actor (and musician) – a notion first introduced in the eighteenth century by classical scholar Thomas Tyrwhitt, editor of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and debunker of Thomas Chatterton's forgeries – relies "not so much on demonstrable proof of formal evidence, but on a kind of spiritual and artistic sense, by which alone […] could the true meaning of the poems be discerned" (Wilde [1921] 2017: 204). Such a cognitive paradigm is not too far from what, at the beginning of the twentieth century, György Lukács would cast as the main appeal of the essay form[6], i.e. its ability to convey a discursive agglomeration of ideas creatively yoked together without strictly counting on proof and scientific evidence:

[6] In "On the Nature and Form of the Essay: A Letter to Leo Popper", Lukács did mention Wilde among the authorities and starting points for his own idea of the essay. See Lukács ([1910] 2010: 17). It should be noted that this particular letter is Wildean in essence not only because it espouses the notion of criticism as a form of art, as expressed in "The Critic as Artist", but also because it relies on a conversational-dialogic structure.

> [The] essay always speaks of something that has already been given form, or at least something that has already been there at some time in the past; hence it is part of the nature of the essay that it does not create new things from an empty nothingness but only orders those which were once alive. And because it orders them anew and does not form something new out of formlessness, it is bound to them and must always speak "the truth" about them, must find expression for their essential nature. (Lukács [1910] 2010: 26)

The Incomparable and Ingenious History of Mr. W.H. is even more telling in this sense, as the additions that Wilde made looked to a deeper development of the essayistic mode, especially via the long digression on male homosocial friendship in Part II, a segment that provoked Charles Elkin Mathews's firm refusal to publish it, regardless of "any price" (Wilde 2000: 607). The textual evidence Erskine produces in Part I basically gravitates around Cyril's close reading of sonnets 20 and 82, where Shakespeare might have introduced puns on the surname 'Hughes' and its homophones; of sonnets 38, 78, 79, 81, 86, where the *fair youth* is depicted as a man of the theatre; and of sonnets 135 and 143, which are all quite straightforwardly deciphered in line with Cyril's myth of 'Will(ie)', in a crescendo that sometimes baffles the anonymous narrator[7]. This said, Cyril's faith in his theory about Willie Hughes and Shakespeare is so deep as to lead him to take his own life, in an (over)dramatic gesture striving to vindicate the alleged righteousness of his ideological cause. This act also adds to the degree of identification of the Victorian young man with the Elizabethan boy actor. As a matter of fact, as readers soon discover, it was Cyril himself who commissioned the fake portrait in order to persuade 'philistine unbelievers' of the worth of his exegetic efforts.

Leaving tragic or provoking irony aside, *Mr. W.H.* appears to be further infused with an essayistic flavour as the I-narrator becomes in turn an advocate of Cyril Graham's theory. His conviction

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[7] The narrator begins to question Erskine's endorsement when observing that the latter pointed out "how completely it [Cyril's theory] corroborated his view; and indeed he went through all the Sonnets carefully, and showed, *or fancied that he showed*, that according to his new explanation of their meaning, things that had seemed obscure, or evil, or exaggerated, became clear and rational" (Wilde [1921] 2017: 205; my emphases).

reminds us of the pivotal moment in a critical essay when the author illustrates his own findings after speculating on what "has already been there at some time in the past" (Lukács [1910] 2010: 26). We are thus presented with a series of collateral points that progressively corroborate the rich essayistic tapestry of the text, which sounds more and more 'critical' and less exclusively fictional. Hence, we see the idea of Shakespeare being primarily a dramatist even when writing poetry (Wilde [1921] 2017: 211-212), an explanation of the marriage isotopy (p. 214), a clarification about the "rival poet" (p. 219), and a long digression on Platonic views of male friendship[8]. Cyril's theories also allow us to posit a very intriguing, if somewhat flimsy, correlation between the figure of Willie Hughes and Romantic ideals of beauty:

> In Willie Hughes, Shakespeare found not merely a most delicate instrument for the presentation of his art, but the visible incarnation of his idea of beauty, and it is not too much to say that to this young actor, whose very name the dull writers of his age forgot to chronicle, the Romantic Movement of English Literature is largely indebted. (p. 228)

Part IV tackles instead the *dark lady* motif with an impressive philological accuracy and even suggests a new ordering for the poems – inserting the *dark lady* sequence (127-152) between sonnets 33 and 40 – with the hope that it "will be adopted by all future editors, as without it an entirely false impression is conveyed of the nature and final issue of this noble friendship" (p. 237).

There is then no doubt that Wilde's treatment of Shakespeare is framed by means of a partly imaginary, partly historical-philolological approach, as confirmed by the characters' search for clues and their decrypting 'autopsy' of the *Sonnets*. When thinking of other critics and commentators, it is interesting to notice that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, a similar approach had characterised Samuel Johnson's practice related to literary criticism. His *Lives of the Poets* (1779-1781) remains a watershed in the history of the interactions between literary biography and criticism at large. Johnson did in fact depart from the traditional classification of biography as a subgenre of historiography – as claimed by John

[8] For a deeper understanding of this aspect, see Evangelista (2006: 240-242).

Dryden in his translation of Plutarch's *Lives* – by forging his text as a sort of interlaced narrative of poetical experiences where the selective partiality of the critic proved a paramount feature (Piré 2017: 64-65). After all, in an often-quoted *Rambler* essay, Johnson did observe that the life of an individual cannot be of use to readers unless the biographer is able to illuminate the "many invisible circumstances which, whether we read as enquirers after natural or moral knowledge, whether we intend to enlarge our science, or increase our virtue, are more important than public occurrences" (Johnson [1750] 2008: 206).

Such an emphasis on the importance of inferences had the merit of releasing biography from the narrow mesh of objective historiography: in addition to being an attentive recorder of facts, the biographer emerges as an interpreter of circumstances and personalities. The biographer's success is allegedly ensured by the ability to provide not only a sketch of the life, but also a clue to the works of an author. Johnson aimed to bypass both the insincerity of hagiography and the greed of Grub-street vultures[9] via the strengthening of "the 'usefulness' of anecdotes, a resistance to 'the mist of panegyric', powerful, strenuous, sometimes wilful critical attentiveness, and a clear sense of what can and can't be known about another person" (Lee 2009). Johnson's renovation of the form would eventually pave the way for James Boswell's own 'biography of the biographer' as well as Romantic experiments with the form, such as William Hazlitt's *Spirit of the Age* (1825), whose "contemporary portraits" were considered the building blocks of the *Stimmung* of a whole age, capable of eliciting a "progress of intellectual refinement, warring with [mankind's] natural infirmities" (Hazlitt 1931: 128-129).

Locating itself at a crossroads between the overtly fictional and the rigorously factual, Wilde's *Mr. W.H.* represents a vivid case study that can help us to better understand facets in the history of British life writing. There is yet another feature that concurs

[9] The account of this progress is sketched with knowledgeable incisiveness by Lee (2009), especially in Chapters 2-3. The spokesman for seventeenth-century suspicions on immoderate praising is Thomas Fuller (via his *Worthies of England*), whereas eighteenth-century's malpractices in biographical writing had been chastised by Joseph Addison in the *Spectator*.

in securing the centrality of this work in the English tradition. As *Mr. W.H.* intermingles fictional and non-fictional stances revolving around Shakespeare's inward essence – and, supposedly, the transference of this essence into his poetical *oeuvre* – it follows that the process of deciphering the *Sonnets* comes close to a critical dissection, or anatomy, of the Bard's life. In his now classical study *The Body Emblazoned*, Jonathan Sawday focuses exactly on the double meaning of the word 'dissect(ion)', referring to both a careful reduction into parts and a methodical division for the sake of critical examination (Sawday 1996: 2). This double nature is also made clear in Lee's already mentioned commentary on biographical writing, and yet the fact that Sawday's book looks at the early modern period allows for some further considerations that involve authoritative authors such as Sir Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, and Thomas Fuller[10]. Seventeenth-century prose writing, and especially the model of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), had possibly more of an enigmatic agency over Wilde's handling of fictional biography than at the philological level. In a sense, the web of interlaced allusions to specific textual instances endorsed by Wilde's three fictional interpreters – Cyril Graham, George Erskine, and the narrator – reminds us of an interpretative taxonomy being laid out on an imaginary table, as though the *Sonnets* objectified the body of an author waiting to be dissected.

Burton's creation of an "antic or personate actor" (Burton [1621] 2001: 16), a fictional feature to expound his views, says much about the politics of his writing. Moreover, the constant pointing in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* to features of splenetic dark humour in every layer of society may be seen as a useful counterpart to Wilde's experiment in biographical and narrative portraiture of Shakespeare. As his characters pass on the 'fatal burden' of Cyril Graham's first intuition, they seem to be subjecting Shakespeare to a progressively critical dissection, including his sensuous body, with its passions and affects. In this light, they arguably join ranks with the anatomist,

[10] In "Pen, Pencil and Poison" Wilde quotes a rather long commentary on Charles Lamb by the essayist, painter, and murderer Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who referred to Lamb's intimate connection with seventeenth-century prose writers as a sign of his mastery of the literary essay's art (Wilde [1891] 2007: 114).

whose work, according to Sawday, is intimately connected to the intellectual level and the goal of acquiring knowledge that shaped the Renaissance as a whole:

> [D]issection or anatomization is […] an act whereby something can also be constructed, or given a concrete presence. In medicine, anatomization takes place so that, in lieu of a formerly complete 'body', a new 'body' of knowledge, an understanding can be created. As the physical body is fragmented, so the body of understanding is held to be shaped and formed. In medicine, too, anatomization takes place in order that the integrity and health of other bodies can be preserved. The anatomist, then, is the person who has reduced one body in order to understand its morphology, and thus to preserve morphology at a later date, in other bodies, somewhere. (Sawday 1996: 2)

In the case of Wilde, the body under scrutiny is a textualised one. Each time a sonnet is excerpted, shredded and reconstructed, some new information emerges regarding the inner life of Shakespeare the man, and thus a new body of understanding, i.e. a new interpretation of the *Sonnets*, is bestowed upon the public. The anatomy cyclically performed by Cyril, Erskine, and the narrator is a ritual that acquires an almost ominous dimension if we consider the process of malevolent scrutiny that Wilde's own life would undergo after his infamous trial. In April 1895, the bankruptcy sale of his household effects came close to a violent dismembering of his material heritage, as "his manuscripts and […] books, […] volumes from Hugo, Whitman, Swinburne, Mallarmé, Morris, and Verlaine, his Burne-Jones and Whistler drawings, paintings by Monticelli and Simeon Solomon, expensive china, Thomas Carlyle's writing desk, and a hundred other things" (Ellmann 1987: 459) – in other words, his artistic possessions – were heartlessly catalogued and pillaged.

Regrettably enough, the judiciary did in fact play the role of a subtler and crueller anatomist in the early modern sense: one not interested in the acquisition of knowledge, but rather in setting the stage for a public execution, metaphorically dismembering the body of the culprit with a morbid interest in exposing the traits of his 'depravity'.

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