

D. G. ROSSETTI, A. C. SWINBURNE
AND R. W. BUCHANAN.
THE FLESHLY SCHOOL REVISITED: I

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Introduction

I

Much ink has been spilled over the Fleshly Controversy in the last one hundred years. Never lacking biographers, D. G. Rossetti, with his growing reputation as artist and poet, is now the focus of more attention than ever; thus this, the most crucial, episode in his life has been retold more than once of late. Buchanan's attacks certainly hastened Rossetti's death and caused the rupture of several relationships of significance to Rossetti, particularly his close friendship with Swinburne. Yet, even now, salient features of the Controversy have not received due consideration, and there is much to be added to, as well as revised in, what has long been regarded as the fullest and fairest version of this unsavoury episode.

Professor John A. Cassidy's "Robert Buchanan and the Fleshly Controversy"¹ was the first attempt to examine, relatively objectively, its entire course, and was a necessary corrective to the partisan versions of Rossetti's biographers over the previous seventy years. Now much primary material, Swinburne's² and Rossetti's letters³ particularly, but also William Michael Rossetti's *Diary*⁴ and a wealth of private correspondence such as Sidney Colvin's letters to D. G. Rossetti⁵ and Buchanan's to

¹ *PMLA*, lxvii (March 1952), 65-93. He also reviewed the Controversy in his *Algernon C. Swinburne* (Boston, 1964) and *Robert W. Buchanan* (Boston, 1973). For several works to which frequent reference is made, abbreviations are provided in initial entries; subsequent citations appear internally in the text.

² *The Swinburne Letters*, 6 vols., ed. Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven, 1959-1962)—abbrev. Lang.

³ *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 4 vols., ed. O. Doughty and J. R. Wahl (Oxford 1965-67)—abbrev. DW.

⁴ *The Diary of W. M. Rossetti, 1870-1873*, ed. O. Bornand (Oxford, 1977)—abbrev. *Diary*.

⁵ In the Angeli Papers at the University of British Columbia, as are unpublished volumes of William Michael's *Diary*.

Robert Browning,⁶ is accessible that was not to Professor Cassidy. His approach, however, remains valid: that only by reviewing the Controversy with some sympathy for Buchanan's point of view can it be properly understood. For it has more complexity than has so far been recognized, and more still, no doubt, that may never be resolved, since Rossetti and Buchanan often based their action upon information, gossip at times, of which posterity knows too little; what passed between Buchanan and Swinburne when they met in March 1869, for example, or the contents of W. B. Scott's letter to William Michael Rossetti of 4 July 1872, which articulated at length Rossetti's reasons for refusing to see Swinburne later that month.

On the one issue essential to a proper understanding of why Buchanan re-issued his *Contemporary* article as the notorious pamphlet, Professor Cassidy chose to disregard Buchanan's statements to the contrary and certain contemporary evidence (in a journal, the *Athenaeum*, sympathetic to Rossetti and therefore not likely to be inaccurate on this matter) when describing how the pseudonym, Thomas Maitland, came to be affixed to "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr. D. G. Rossetti" in the *Contemporary Review* for October 1871. Buchanan consistently denied responsibility for the pseudonym. Following Rossetti, and Swinburne, whose public statements on the matter from *Under the Microscope* to *Jonas Fisher* attack Buchanan with great persistence for his pseudonymous onslaughts on himself and his friend, Professors Cassidy (pp. 74-5) and C. K. Hyder, in the Introduction to his invaluable *Swinburne Replies*,⁷ both consider Buchanan to be lying. To be fair, the matter is made no easier by the fact that Buchanan was not telling the entire truth about the pseudonym, for it was not, as he said, an "inadvertence" that led to the suppression of his name; nevertheless, Alexander Strahan, publisher of the *Contemporary Review* and friend of Buchanan,

⁶ At the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, whose permission to publish excerpts is gratefully acknowledged. Very little of Buchanan's papers, including his autobiography in manuscript at the time of his death, appears to survive. He carried on correspondence with many of the important men and women of his day. His letters to Browning, Shaw, Monckton Milnes and Gladstone, survive; theirs to him, with much else of great value, apparently do not.

⁷ (Syracuse, 1966), pp. 7-8. This authoritative edition is used for all references to *Notes on Poems and Reviews* and *Under the Microscope* — abbrev. Hyder.

chose and affixed the pseudonym, thereby setting in motion a chain of events that led inexorably to Rossetti's breakdown nine months later.

If the question of the pseudonym has not yet been sufficiently elucidated in previous accounts of the Controversy, neither has Sidney Colvin's crucial role. He reviewed *Poems* three times, even causing William Bell Scott to warn Rossetti that in using Colvin he was courting danger. Colvin was active in discovering Thomas Maitland's identity, securing valuable evidence from the editor of the *Contemporary Review*, and he gave Rossetti help and encouragement throughout the winter of 1871-2. Early in the new year he promised Rossetti that he would be reviewing Buchanan's pamphlet, which he feared might not appear, in the *Athenaeum*; later he promised Rossetti that it would be reviewed unfavourably in several journals, particularly in the *Saturday Review*.

In response to Colvin's provocations, and, to a lesser extent, to those of the editor, Norman MacColl, of the *Athenaeum*, Buchanan resolved to republish his article as a pamphlet. Had he deliberately set out to induce in Rossetti a conviction that a conspiracy was forming against him he could scarcely have planned his response to the reception of his *Contemporary* article with more cunning. Evidently determined to make Rossetti's debut as a poet as tempestuous as his own had been declared to be by W. M. Rossetti in 1866, besides the original attack, he wrote, among other things, perhaps, two letters to the *Athenaeum* over his own name, and, in a signed essay on Tennyson, further castigated Rossetti's latinate diction; a month later, in an article over a pseudonym known to Rossetti, he deplored all anonymous criticism and declared that the Fleshly School was not as dangerous to the rising generation "as some critics persist in telling us." After publishing his pamphlet in May, he reviewed it anonymously in a London daily paper, so Rossetti's friends believed at least, thereby making good a threat made to MacColl the previous December; and he may have written the notice of his pamphlet that precipitated Rossetti's collapse.

No explanation yet offered for that collapse three weeks after the publication of Buchanan's pamphlet has been quite satisfactory. What tipped the scales was the *Saturday Review* notice of the pamphlet for 2 June. Colvin had promised Rossetti that the review would be hostile to Buchanan, and so it was; but it was also markedly unsympathetic to Rossetti. He now believed either that

Buchanan was indeed its author or that he had managed to persuade the editor to join his campaign against him or, at the very least, that independent observers of the Controversy were becoming convinced that Buchanan was right. Some time before this date Rossetti must have recognized Buchanan's hints in the pamphlet concerning the liaison with Janey Morris coupled with the ludicrous guying of his friendship with the dipsomaniac Swinburne. An important letter to Joseph Knight records the moment, just before the new and totally unexpected attack in the *Saturday Review*, of Rossetti's decision to stand aloof from "these monstrous libels—both the pamphlet and its press results,"⁸ perhaps an admission that the libels were also truths and thus not actionable. The new onslaught destroyed this resolve and undermined Rossetti's sanity. Held up to public ridicule for nine months for his unmanly reliance on puffs from his friends, for his cowardice, in effect; now ridiculed for his adultery with the wife of a member of his "school;" he saw no honourable course open to him. According to his brother he even considered challenging Buchanan to a duel.⁹ Stronger natures than his would have found such pressure intolerable, and his collapse into acute paranoia and his attempted suicide become entirely comprehensible.

While Professor Lang's explanation for the rupture of Rossetti's friendship with Swinburne, "matched in English literary history only by the intimacy between Coleridge and Wordsworth" (Lang, i.p. xlv), is the most succinct and plausible yet offered, it, too, needs to be reconsidered. Only through a recension of the Fleshly Controversy can Swinburne's prominent role therein be properly appreciated. Even the epithet 'fleshly' Buchanan found in Swinburne's review of *Poems*,¹⁰ and thus its every repetition in the ensuing months would have reminded Rossetti of Swinburne's accountability; this famous eulogy, which has not yet been read as

⁸ He refers to the review in the *Echo* that Knight later was "convinced" Buchanan himself wrote. Written either on 20 May, or, more probably, 27 May, the letter is dated only "Monday night," and is quoted by Knight in his *Life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1887), pp. 141-2, and is not to be found in DW.

⁹ W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir*, 2 vols. (London, 1895), ii. 306 — abbrev. *Memoir*.

¹⁰ Swinburne used it four times, even using the term "fleshly brotherhood" ("The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Fortnightly Review*, May 1870, p. 570). W. H. Pater, in his review of Morris's poems, also used the word in a sentence excised when republished in *Appreciations* ("Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review*, October 1868, p. 301).

Buchanan read it, also contains particularly choice provocations to him. Ten years after the attack, Rossetti considered not himself but Swinburne to have been Buchanan's principal combatant,¹¹ which seems an expression of his belief that the conflict was essentially between those two, and thus that his suffering so virulent a series of attacks was in large measure Swinburne's doing. Finally, in *Under the Microscope*, published only a month after Rossetti's collapse, Swinburne demonstrated an insensitivity to his friend's feelings that no one, least of all Rossetti, embattled as he then saw himself to be, could have forgiven.

In the Introduction to his most important contribution to our understanding of the effect of Buchanan's attacks on Rossetti, "Prelude to the Last Decade: Dante Gabriel Rossetti in the Summer of 1872,"¹² Professor W.E. Fredeman surveys the growth of the legend about Rossetti, carefully fostered by W.M. Rossetti and Theodore Watts-Dunton, which had as its aim

to project an image of a maligned and misunderstood genius who stood outside the pale of human weakness and who met and conquered myriad adversities; of a poet and painter of inestimable quality and incomparable aesthetic influence whose generosity and encouragement of men of lesser talent was without parallel; of a man whose single flaw was his uxorious devotion to an ideal of beauty symbolized by a deceased spouse to whom he rendered the supreme sacrifice of committing his creative self to her coffin, and who because of the torments of his dedicated existence died before his time (p. 76).

If Professor Fredeman is correct, then so is the corollary to his statement: that Rossetti's traducer was the basest and most malignant creature imaginable, without a shred of intelligence or integrity, a denizen of Grub Street sunk to character-assassination

¹¹ This appears in William Michael's Diary for January 6, 1882: "I saw (copied out by Sharp) the verses "To an Old Enemy" wh. Buchanan has prefixed to his latest novel "God and the Man." They are generally, and I think correctly, assumed to be addressed to Gabriel, and they certainly form a handsome retraction of past invidious attacks: G. thinks the verses may really be intended for Swinburne..."

¹² *Bulletin*, liii (1970-71), 75-121 and 272-238. Here I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Professor Fredeman for his generosity, provocation and encouragement.

in order to achieve whatever eminence or income such action would bring. Swinburne was the first to say this, but Professor Doughty's invective is almost worthy of Swinburne:

Low in mind, low in taste, low in breeding, and, as an apostle of morality, evidently insincere; such was Buchanan... For Buchanan was not only a hypocrite but a clumsy hypocrite, and not through any element of honesty, but through sheer stupidity perhaps the most contemptible figure in English literary history. Beside him, Collier denouncing Dryden appears, despite his crudity and stupidity and arrogance, an embodiment of good taste.¹³

A man of strong emotions, Buchanan left himself open to such charges, even courted them; Matthew Arnold called him "a clever, but raw and intemperate Scotch youth" in 1868,¹⁴ and, after Buchanan's death, William Michael Rossetti wrote, quite justly, that he "was open to the imputation of being 'ill-conditioned'—irritable, litigious, self-assertive, and when roused into ire, not duly scrupulous".¹⁵ The most sympathetic yet witty contemporary assessment of his multi-faceted character and diverse activities came from Israel Zangwill in 1895:

Are there many Buchanans whom we have all been ignorantly confounding? There is a poet Buchanan, Byronic and brilliant, who is only nominally the same as Buchanan the mystic (not to be confounded with Buchanan the materialist). There is also Buchanan the complete letter-writer, who is unrelated to Buchanan the author of 'Christian Romances,' who, in his turn, suffers from being identified with the Buchanan who writes novels for the other person, and it need hardly be said that none of these gentlemen is Buchanan the essayist, or Buchanan the business man... They were all born in different years, and some of them are dead. Several are men of genius, and one or two are Philistines whom the others dislike.¹⁶

Much earlier, Rossetti, too, came to recognize Buchanan's propensity for disagreeing with, or even deriding, himself in public. He saw "Caliban's" description of Buchanan being "moony, conceited, and narrow," in "The Session of the Poets"

¹³ O. Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1960), p. 499.

¹⁴ *Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. G. W. E. Russell (London, 1895), i. 389.

¹⁵ *Some Reminiscences* (London, 1906), ii. 525.

¹⁶ Quoted by A. Stodart-Walker, *Robert Buchanan: The Poet of Modern Revolt* (London, 1901), p. 1.

(*Spectator*, 15 September 1866, p. 1028), as an attempt to veil his authorship when attacking Swinburne (DW, 1201). He knew, too, in April 1872, that "Walter Hutcheson" was Buchanan's pseudonym which he used in the course of an impassioned appeal for an end to all unsigned criticism, in which also appeared this:

The Mutual Admiration School of Poetry is scarcely read out of London, and produces no impression whatever on the public; the fact being that sensualists and spoonneys are not so common as some critics persist in telling us ("Criticism as One of the Fine Arts," *Saint Pauls*, x. 389).

Assuredly he is once again referring to the way Rossetti's reputation as a poet was secured, but, in belittling Rossetti and his circle, he is, quite characteristically, trying to minimise, even apologize for, his own conduct of the previous six months, and, giving evidence of his own capacity for reviewing his own pamphlet unsympathetically. For Buchanan was no unthinking, unselfconscious, literary bully, but was well aware of his shortcomings and how the world viewed them.¹⁷ Apt to be forthright, apt to condemn too swiftly and too severely, and possessing, as R. E. Francillion put it, "'a consuming indignation against injustice,'" ¹⁸ Buchanan could appear intensely intolerant. He was warned against this time and again by his family and friends. In a letter to Roden Noel, written in 1868, he acknowledged his "horrid bigotry," it being his vice, he knew well, that he "must love a thing wholly, or dislike it wholly" (Jay, pp. 154-5). In the accompanying list of those whose work did not move him appeared Swinburne's name, and about him Buchanan was extremely ambivalent. He admired his skill as a poet but deplored the uses to which that skill was put. In December 1870, after he had met him, had read his celebration of Napoleon III's downfall, and his review of *Poems*, the dilemma Swinburne presented him finds characteristic expression in a most important letter to Robert Browning. Proposing to dedicate to a reluctant Browning his own verses on the same topic, and denying that they were a "'glorification' over the fallen," Buchanan continued

No; there is in my poem no attempt whatever to sentimentalize, but I think the general effect is to awaken sympathy with the subject. Shall I,

¹⁷ Another public acknowledgment of his tendency to be "raw and intemperate" comes in the Preface to *The Land of Lorne* (London, 1871) where he calls himself "a semi-barbarian, a half-civilized striker of a Celtic harp" (i. 2).

¹⁸ Quoted by H. Jay, *Robert Buchanan* (London, 1903), p. 200 — abbrev. Jay.

who have been howled at for finding brother and sister among whores and thieves, hurl epithets as some have done at a Tyrant overthrown? I cannot describe with what loathing and horror I have read such verses as those called "Intercession" by that conscienceless and miserable inanity,¹⁹ little Swinburne: —verses which brooded, with a feminine fiendishness, over the prospect of physical suffering and torture to the subject. Don't think that I will ever develop the aesthetic instinct at the expense of conscience and feeling. I would rather die. Truth first; afterwards, if possible, Beauty.

In a word, I feel convinced that you could accept the dedication of 'Napoleon' in perfect security and satisfaction. I am not an imperialist, I am in principle a republican; but I am above all one whose religion inculcates charity—to those above and those below me. 'Charity!' I hear you echo, referring to the epithets 'miserable' and 'conscienceless' as applied to Swinburne. The fact is, charity is always right, and it is one more fault and disgrace if we are not always charitable. It requires however a superhuman effort to be thoroughly charitable when the personal antagonism is so intense,—but that effort should be made.

Buchanan's hatred of evil here comes into sharp conflict, as he immediately shows himself aware, with his profound belief, iterated and reiterated in poem and novel, in mankind's necessity to love one another. He had been publicly rebuked only a year earlier by someone close to Swinburne (if not Swinburne himself, see below, pp. 224-5) for preaching charity yet not having a good word for anybody, and thus, perhaps, he was more than ever conscious of his most conspicuous inconsistency. Not long after this letter, as an act of contrition perhaps for it and for his comments on Swinburne in "George Heath" (see below, p. 233), Buchanan persuaded John Chapman to call on William Michael with a view "to see whether he could not treat Swinburne [currently suffering from some disorder, probably delirium tremens] according to his spinal ice-bag system—which it seems has proved very beneficial in Buchanan's own case" (*Diary*, pp. 55-6).

Buchanan need not have suffered such contrition, for his reaction to "Intercession" was exactly what Swinburne hoped and expected it would be (Lang, ii. 44). There is a certain terrible inevitability to the Fleshly Controversy. Swinburne's prickly sense of honour and his provocations to the bourgeois found their answer in Buchanan's dogged fearlessness and sturdy Philistinism;

¹⁹ Maisie Ward reads this word to be "insanity," *Robert Browning and His World* (London, 1969), ii. 102.

Rossetti's incipient paranoia was matched by Buchanan's own extreme sensitivity to criticism (as shown in the letter to Browning quoted above); and Colvin's "impertinence" assuredly found Buchanan's "intemperance." Swinburne and Buchanan, totally unlike each other as they were, shared one value with many of their contemporaries: they despised anyone who showed any sign of flinching when under fire. Buchanan's earliest memories, as the son of a notorious freethinker, were of being chased through the streets of Glasgow, the Sabbatarian City, as he called it, by larger boys shouting "Infidel! Infidel!" after him. Such an environment had early taught him to be prepared for the unexpected attack and had taught him to fight back. Swinburne, of diminutive stature and odd appearance, would have had a not dissimilar experience at Eton, where his quick tongue and ready courage apparently earned him reprieve from the harshest experiences of a junior at an English public school. Both men had learnt something of verbal warfare young, and both men prided themselves on manly conduct in battle.

There is one last, but most important, element of Robert Buchanan's character that throws into utter confusion the contradictions already briefly described: he had a well-developed sense of humour. He became noted for it with the publication of "The Session of the Poets,"²⁰ and this was neither the first nor last time that he made Rossetti and his circle the butt of his wit. Indeed his biographer long ago wrote that Buchanan was motivated in part by the desire "to be smart and funny at the expense of a clique whose antics were... highly absurd" (Jay, p. 159). His first attack on the Pre-Raphaelites, written when he was not yet twenty-one, came in his burlesque of the "sensation" novel, "Lady Letitia's Lilliput Hand," and his first target was not them, but their champion. "Mr Buskin's" "remarkable criticism" of our hero's recent painting was preserved in this footnote:

What I praise in this work is *conscience*. Mr. Vansittart follows the painters who came before Raphael, and he finds *truth*. Nor does his religious copying of physical nature at all mar the naked force of his conception. His 'Donkey feeding on Thistles' will stand out to all time as the representation of the *Christian principle of patience*. On a common

²⁰ Which was widely admired, the occasion for Arnold's "clever," and anthologized, e.g. in Arthur Elliott's *The Witty and Humorous Side of the English Poets* (London, 1880), pp. 279-280.

like that before us, Raphael would have placed the mythological white ass of Silenus. Vansittart has *conscience*, and, instead of myth, he gives us moral Christian truth (*Temple Bar*, March 1862, p. 554).

Later Vansittart gives his muddle-headed aesthetic of art as anaesthesia:

'Without mere beauty, art, as revealed to us, would be stale, flat, unprofitable... To instruct us indirectly, art must deaden or spiritualize those senses which contact with gross things has perhaps defiled. To be beautiful alone, is to be all-powerful; for beauty trances the gazer into forgetfulness... It is only when we can cast off our earthly fetters unaware that we are perfectly happy...' (p. 559).

Perhaps in H. Buxton Forman's "The 'Fleshly School' Scandal" Buchanan found the hint for the right manner for rephrasing his attack on Rossetti. Of his original review of *Poems* Forman wrote that Buchanan could well have been "some case-hardened Presbyterian fanatic to whom the very mention of flesh carried the suggestion of the devil with it" (*Tinsley's Magazine*, February 1872, p. 90). Buchanan, who had written a dramatic monologue in 1867 using just such a speaker in a similar context, adopted such a persona for the opening chapter of his pamphlet. His epigraph from *Martin Chuzzlewit* signals his purpose, that in essence, like Pip, Buchanan is setting an elaborate plot in which to ensnare Rossetti and Swinburne. To his credit, Sidney Colvin recognized Buchanan's attempt to entertain, to attempt to joke in print about matters sexual in 1871, but for Colvin and for nearly everyone who has read it since²¹ the joke fell remarkably flat:

Some of the shifts to which he is driven in the vindication and substantiation of his charges would be entertaining enough, if only the writer would stop short of intolerable grossness (*Athenaeum*, 25 May 1872, p. 650).

Buchanan, however, continued the joke when, anticipating much that Colvin and others were to say, he reviewed his own pamphlet in the *Echo* on 18 May. Calling his history of sensuality in English literature "uninstructed as well as unjust," he deplores his "unnecessary offensiveness:"

²¹ J.H. Buckley sees no humour whatsoever and cites the whole passage and the entire pamphlets as "products of a mind itself diseased, obsessed with deep inhibitions, unnaturally familiar with a long tradition of scatological literature" (*The Victorian Temper* (London, 1952)), p. 162.

if [Rossetti's verses] were justly liable to be censured as sensual, many of them become absolutely filthy in Mr Buchanan's handling... One almost suspects occasionally that Mr Buchanan relishes the denunciation of 'fleshliness,' if not the 'fleshliness' itself. He has certainly posted himself well up in fleshly literature, homegrown and foreign, ancient and modern, and is entitled to be regarded somewhat in the light of a martyr, if he has carefully read through all the naughty French books to which he refers, without any personal pleasure, and with a single eye to the welfare of his fellow-men (p. 1).

However Buchanan mounted his attack, the fact remains that he carried it out. The animus for it was caused principally by Swinburne's unfeeling remark about David Gray in 1867 (as Buchanan claimed in the well-known letter to Robert Browning of March 1872). Rossetti organized the reception of *Poems* to stifle Buchanan's known hostility. In doing so he reminded Buchanan of the dismal poetic debuts of David Gray and a host of other struggling writers who could not command the press in Rossetti's fashion.²² Buchanan's sense of justice was outraged by the events

²² Buchanan's loyalty to Gray was absolute. Gray's early death was caused by the privations suffered in London when trying to earn a living by his pen. For Buchanan, writing soon after, his Pre-Raphaelite hero's "hard fight" with his family and friends "to become a professional artist, a 'trade' which his friends considered extremely low," would have had very bitter overtones ("Lady Letitia's Lilliput Hand," *Temple Bar*, March 1862, p. 555). Buchanan evidently saw the Pre-Raphaelites as snobbish wealthy young aristocrats dabbling in the arts, thus depriving sincere and needy young men like Gray of the barest livelihood. Buchanan's subsequent encounters with Swinburne did nothing to correct this impression.

There is an added irony to the entire episode that should be recorded here. In October 1871 Buchanan put the finishing touches to his *Saint Abe and his Seven Wives*, which he published anonymously in December. This series of monologues is a satire on Mormon polygamy written with a lightness of touch and verve of which few would credit Buchanan of being capable when discussing matters sexual. Buchanan published it anonymously so that it could find its way without any preconceptions about its authorship beclouding its critical reception: this as a deliberate response to *Poems*' publication the previous year (as Buchanan wrote when republishing it over his own name and imprint it 1896, p. 171). *Saint Abe* was the most successful verse that Buchanan ever published, and by May 1872 a "third, enlarged edition" was being advertised. What heightens the irony is Odette Bornand's opinion (*Diary*, p. 154) that William Michael himself reviewed the work most favourably in the *Athenaeum*, 23 December 1871 (the review being frequently quoted thereafter to promote sales) and his brother found it to have "considerable force and spirit" (*Memoir*, i. 299), all this just when the brothers were mounting counter-attacks against its author.

of early 1870, yet even then it was not until reading of just such another poetic career as Gray's in early 1871 that Buchanan even read *Poems*. What Rossetti sought to avoid he brought upon himself.²³ Buchanan cited the events of 1870 time and again in his attacks on Rossetti. His argument is simple, and, to many important contemporaries, eminently reasonable. He had seen Pre-Raphaelitism as a baneful influence in art before it became much evident in literature. *Poems and Ballads* confirmed his worst fears, and since Rossetti was the head of the movement, Swinburne's sins were attributable to him; so, too, was every attack Buchanan suffered at Swinburne's or William Michael's hands, hence the fury of his onslaught when it came.

The Antecedents

There is no evidence that Rossetti, currently mourning his wife, ever saw Buchanan's attacks on the Pre-Raphaelites in *Temple Bar*, and there is no mention of his name in the correspondence between him and his friends until January 1866. By this time Buchanan had established a reputation as a promising poet and had been contracted by J. B. Payne to edit Keats for Moxon. Writing to William Michael that Payne had cancelled Buchanan's work and was now offering Keats to him, Swinburne recorded his "delight" at the prospect "of trampling on a Scotch Poetaster" of whom he was not sure William Michael had heard (Lang, i. 146). Independently of each other, both the Rossettis and Swinburne had conceived a marked distaste for Buchanan's personality and verse, to the extent that William Michael, staid, respectable and unemotional, would establish at the very outset the scatological nature of the exchanges concerning Buchanan during the next five years: "I confess a peculiar abhorrence of Buchanan, and satisfaction that his Caledonian faeces are not to bedaub the corpse of Keats..."²⁴ William Michael's aversion can hardly have been caused merely by reading the verse cited in laudatory reviews and may be based on a recognition of his hostility to the Pre-

²³ W. B. Scott, that most important observer of the Controversy, was of the opinion at the time (and much later) that Rossetti's having "*planted*" "so many laudatory reviews" caused Buchanan's attack (*Bulletin*, liii. 80).

²⁴ Georges Lafourcade, *Swinburne's Hyperion and Other Poems* (London, 1929), pp. 30-1.

Raphaelites. Ironically, D. G. Rossetti's comment is remarkably restrained, Buchanan's success not perturbing him as much as it did his brother or Swinburne, but for him, too, "the puddling of Keats with Buchanan is a fearful thought" (DW, 663). Sooner or later Buchanan heard that he was the butt of insulting gossip (Jay, p. 159), perhaps as early as this episode, and, if T. Earle Welby is to be believed, "was looking for opportunities for reprisal" as a result of the cancelling of his edition of Keats.²⁵ Such an opportunity was not long in coming.

With its sensuality, paganism, and blasphemy, Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* burst upon the placid Victorian literary scene in the summer of 1866. John Morley's sincere outrage at *Poems and Ballads*, recorded in the *Saturday Review* (4 August 1866) was matched by Buchanan's own slightly less sincere diatribe in the *Athenaeum* (also on 4 August). Four years Swinburne's junior, Buchanan adopted a patronizing tone calculated to reflect most faithfully the sense of moral shock that many Victorians felt on first reading *Poems and Ballads*. Attributing Swinburne's excesses to the faults of youth, and, it must be noted, citing "evil advisers" twice as another probable cause, Buchanan chastised him for being "deliberately and impertinently insincere as an artist": the cardinal sin in Buchanan's aesthetics. The verses were "unclean, with little power; and mere uncleanness repulses. Here, in fact, we have Gito, seated in the tub of Diogenes, conscious of the filth and whining at the stars" (p. 137). Swinburne's letters record his "quasi-venereal enjoyment" of such abuse, with its implications concerning Swinburne's supposed homosexual proclivities, and its display, always a hallmark of Buchanan's invective of this period, of a good knowledge of the more salacious part of western literature.

Not content with this onslaught on Swinburne, which is certainly directed at the man as much as at his work, Buchanan betrayed for those who penetrated the identity of "Caliban" further animosity towards him in "The Session of the Poets" published over that pseudonym in the *Spectator* (15 September 1866) in which he lampooned Swinburne's weakness for alcohol, using the poet's favourite anapests. Buchanan described himself in the poem as "looking moony, conceited, and narrow", finding "Apollo asleep on a coster-girl's barrow, Straight dragged him away to see

²⁵ *Back Numbers* (London, 1929), p. 153.

somebody hung;" his vanity could not exclude him from a list of contemporary poets, and his prudence must have seen this as a useful disguise; it was, too, a not inaccurate assessment of what the world saw him to be. Caliban's identity was soon established,²⁶ that of the anonymous reviewer in the *Athenaeum* took some time longer, as W. M. Rossetti's Diary shows, his entry for 22 October recording J. W. Marston's denial that he wrote the review. By 12 November, however, in time for William Michael's pamphlet, Buchanan was known to be its author (Lang, i. 212).

Having been attacked by men of some stature, and incapable of ignoring such attacks,²⁷ Swinburne published *Notes on Poems and Reviews* in October 1866. Calling his times "an age of hypocrites," claiming his poetry to be genuine and sincere, he peppered his reply to his critics with many incidental gibes, the best being his gratuitous, and funny, description of "Faustine" as being "the reverie of a man gazing on the bitter and vicious loveliness of a face as common and as cheap as the morality of reviewers..." Referring to the "hoarser choir" of idyl-writing imitators of Tennyson, Swinburne continued

We have idyls good and bad, ugly and pretty; idyls of the farm and the mill; idyls of the dining-room and the deanery; idyls of the gutter and the gibbet. If the Muse of the minute will not feast with "gigmen" and their wives, she must mourn with costermongers and their trulls (Hyder, p. 31).

Buchanan had used the word "coster-girl" in "The Session of the Poets" and considered Swinburne's reference to costermongers a deliberate thrust at him, since in his *London Poems* (1866) he had turned to social strata not usually the subject for serious verse. In his review of Swinburne's defence, Buchanan, with commendable serenity, expressed the hope that Swinburne would win "that public testimony of esteem which is always ready to be awarded as the crown of the pure, the sincere and the inspired poet" (*Athenaeum*, 3 Nov., p. 565).

On this positive note, the running battle, scarcely engaged as yet, might have ended with no harm done, were it not that William

²⁶ C.K. Hyder, *Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame* (New York, 1933), p. 95.

²⁷ See his letter to Matthew Arnold on the subject (Lang, i. 300). Rossetti, be it noted, considered the reception of *Poems and Ballads* "shamefully one-sided" (DW, 694).

Michael Rossetti in November published his *Swinburne's Poems and Ballads: A Criticism*, which opened with this acknowledgment of Buchanan's recent anonymous and pseudonymous sallies:

The advent of a new poet is sure to cause a commotion of one kind or another; and it would be hard were this otherwise in times like ours, when the advent of so poor and pretentious a poetaster as a Robert Buchanan stirs storms in teapots (p. 7).

When discussing the Controversy thirty years later, Buchanan declared that from the instant he read that remark he considered himself free "to strike at the whole coterie" (Jay, p. 161). Thus Rossetti subsequently suffered for his brother's momentary lapse, Buchanan being quite indiscriminate in this matter and heaping responsibility on D.G. Rossetti's shoulders for the actions of members his circle. Moreover, Buchanan is not quite telling the truth. He evidently told Robert Browning of William Michael's gibe and its antecedents and received the best advice possible, which did not, for once, go unheeded. On 26 November while mourning the death of his father, Buchanan wrote to Browning, "More and more thanks! Yes; silence is golden, and shall not answer [*sic*] Mister Gigadibs and his brothers—God bless you!" Thus Robert Browning was aware very early of the skirmishes between Buchanan and the Pre-Raphaelites, but he was, apparently, trying to restrain Buchanan, and almost certainly not giving him clandestine encouragement.

Perhaps Buchanan would have maintained that silence indefinitely; but within a year, with Swinburne's review of "Mr. Arnold's New Poems," another engagement began with Swinburne's most unfortunate and unnecessary reference to the poetic skill of Buchanan's friend David Gray. Referring to Wordsworth's doctrine that poetic inspiration was more important to a poet than the mastering of poetic technique, Swinburne, the poetic technician *par excellence*, wrote

There is no such thing as a dumb poet or a handless painter. The essence of an artist is that he should be articulate. It is mere impudence or weakness to arrogate the name of poet or painter with no other claim than a susceptible and impressionable sense of outward or inward beauty, producing an impotent desire to paint or sing. The poets that are made by nature are not many, and whatever 'vision' an aspirant may possess, he has not the 'divine faculty' if he cannot use his vision to any poetic purpose. There is no cant more pernicious... than that which

asserts the reverse... Such talk as this of Wordsworth's is the poison of poor souls like David Gray.²⁸

It can be no coincidence that Swinburne returned to this question two and one half years later in his review of *Poems*. Writing to stifle Buchanan's anticipated response to Rossetti's verse, Swinburne could not refrain from deliberately antagonizing him, and it may well be the later essay with its subtle reminders of this slur on Gray that helped determine Buchanan's own reaction to *Poems*.

Professor Hyder is undoubtedly correct²⁹ when suggesting that the *Spectator's* response to "Mr. Arnold's New Poems" only four days later, "Mr. Swinburne as Critic," was written by Buchanan. Evidently Swinburne attributed the piece to him at the time, for in a letter to W. M. Rossetti, and referring to Henry Kingsley, he wrote on 11 October,

He is also excited about the very gross insolence and scurrility of the *Spectator* and we both think the polecat's nest wants smoking out. For Urizen's sake—or rather Orc's—hasten the *Whitman* work if you can—for I see advertised in a thing called the 'Broadway'—this! 'Walt Whitman: by Robert Buchanan:' the word 'polecat' reminded me (Lang, i. 271).

When Buchanan had shown Swinburne's comment on Gray to Lord Houghton, who had been most generous to Gray, "he was much surprised and vexed and said... 'O, he did this to annoy me!'" (Jay, p. 161). Once assured that Swinburne's purpose was to provoke rather than to tell the truth, Buchanan, yet again reminded of Swinburne's insincerity, with typical speed and with a paranoid certainty as to Swinburne's purpose which, also, was all too much in character, assumed the provocation to be aimed at himself. He repaid it with generosity. Expressing surprise at

²⁸ *Fortnightly Review*, 1 October 1867, p. 428. When Swinburne republished this review in *Essays and Studies* (1875) the reference to David Gray was amplified in a footnote, which, in 1899, Buchanan erroneously cited as the first cause of his animosity towards Swinburne (Jay, p. 161). It probably did contribute to Buchanan's decision to sue Peter Taylor the following year. Buchanan's memoir, "David Gray," attested his close friendship with Gray while establishing Buchanan's reputation as a promising man of letters (*Cornhill Magazine*, ix, (February 1864), 164-177).

²⁹ *Swinburne's Literary Career and Fame*, p. 133 and *Swinburne Replies*, p. 6.

Swinburne's "much greater wealth of critical perception than we might have expected of him," the *Spectator* accused Swinburne of marring his critical insights by interposing his "excitable personality" too often between the reader and the subject of his study, Arnold's verse; citing the passage already quoted, the writer asks what could have induced Swinburne "to go off into the... digression of the theory of 'dumb poets' and 'handless painters', unless it be the pleasure of the sneer at an exquisite poet who died in his youth, with which it is illustrated?" After chiding Swinburne for overdoing his "ecstasies" concerning Christina Rossetti (p. 1160), which Buchanan would have seen as yet another example of the development of a School for Mutual Admiration (Swinburne himself called it a "fierce puff", Lang, i. 264), the writer, assuredly Buchanan,³⁰ reverts to the "incidental sneer at David Gray," going on to praise his sonnets which "seem... far above any of the Arnold's sonnets, except the one great sonnet on Sophocles," which "will live as long as English literature." Deploring again Swinburne's distracting self-consciousness as a critic, Buchanan's major charge against him and Rossetti as poets later, the critic concludes his essay by damning Swinburne's "affected eloquence, false digressions, meaningless impertinence, and eager indecency" (p. 1111).

Writing on 1 December 1867, Buchanan showed his anger once more at Swinburne and at his intimate friends when, in his "First Word" to *David Gray and Other Essays* (published in late January 1868), he again extolled (with the same adjective used in the *Spectator*) Gray's "exquisite music," which was "too low and tender to attract crowds, or to entice coteries delighted with the scream of the whippersnapper" (p. vi). In his essay on Whitman, in *David Gray*, referred to in Swinburne's letter quoted above (which essay had been published in *Broadway* for November 1867), Buchanan commends the "strongly masculine" quality of the American's verse "unsicklied by Lesbian bestialities and Petronian aberrations" (p. 215) and later, perhaps referring to Swinburne's well-known enthusiasm for Whitman, Buchanan writes "He is the voice of which America stood most in need—a voice at which ladies scream and whippersnappers titter with delight..." (p. 220). In the last essay, that on his own verse,

³⁰ In his journal, *Light*, there is an article on Arnold containing remarkably close textual parallels to this review (31 August 1878, p. 649).

Buchanan, once again publicly betraying his paranoid tendencies, declared (which Swinburne in *Under the Microscope* not unnaturally denied was the case) that a "gifted young contemporary, who seems fond of throwing stones in my direction, fiercely upbraids me for writing 'Idyls of the gallows and the gutter', and singing songs of 'costermongers and their trulls'" (p. 291).

Buchanan's uneven essays were severely reviewed both in the *Spectator*, presumably by R. H. Hutton,³¹ on 8 February 1868 and the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 21 February. In the first Buchanan's "great bigotry" was deplored, as was the "jarring and abrupt prominence of his own personality" throughout the book (Buchanan's objection concerning Swinburne in the same journal the previous October). The *Spectator* particularly disliked Buchanan's opinion that in his verse Matthew Arnold "no sooner touches the solid ground of contemporary thought than all his grace forsakes him, and his utterance becomes the merest prose" (*David Gray*, p. 296), and cited "Heine's Grave" and the famous lines of "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" to refute him (p. 165).³² Characteristically Buchanan wrote a long reply, entitled "Mr. Buchanan on Literary Morality," which was published in the next issue; in it Arnold, among other things, was called a "trifler" and the verse quoted described as not "contemporary." The editor of the *Spectator*, with a forbearance and mildness that make their own delicious contribution to the humour of the exchange, noted that "Our correspondent appears to have some esoteric and peculiar interpretation for this remarkable work. Both quotations are the latest reflections of a modern mind on modern phenomena." Yet again Buchanan returned to the offensive and castigated both Arnold for his "self-inflated egotism" and Carlyle for his "insincerity and brutality," concluding that both "lack charity" (pp. 227-8). This intemperance did Buchanan no good, and he was publicly rebuked for it in acerbic fashion thirteen days later.

The notice of *David Gray* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* was the severest attack on Buchanan as poet and essayist that he had yet

³¹ Buchanan attributed the article to Hutton. R. H. Tener, however, does not ("The Writings of Richard Holt Hutton: A Check-List of Identifications," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 17 September 1972).

³² Arnold considered Buchanan's animus to be caused by the harsh, anonymous review of his verse containing Arnold's "doctrines" which, he thought, Buchanan probably attributed to him (*Letters of Matthew Arnold*, i. 389).

suffered. Written by someone close to Swinburne and his intimates, the review attacked Buchanan particularly for his comments on Arnold in the *Spectator* and picked up Swinburne's and W. M. Rossetti's criticism of Buchanan eighteen months earlier; thus Arnold became the medium, in a journal edited by his friend Frederick Greenwood, for another round in what was to become the Fleshly Controversy. Reading this review Buchanan might well have thought Swinburne its author; the characteristic use of aporia in the opening paragraph, a vocabulary containing remarkably Swinburnian echoes, and Swinburne's resolve "to smoke out the polecat's nest" certainly support this view.³³

The anonymous reviewer began by asking a question about his poetic competence which must have reminded Buchanan both by its prominence and by the repetition of his epithet of W. M. Rossetti's wounding remark in November 1866:

Were his writings those of a man with fair sensibility, generous sympathy, decent power of observation, who might with industry and experience acquire skill enough in his instrument to earn a place among versifiers of the third or fourth rate, or were they the compositions of a sheer poetaster? (p. 11).

"The striking fault of these essays" was neither Buchanan's "flabby and weedy kind of prose style" nor his conceit but "their intolerably bad spirit."

Here is a critic who, maintaining that he is working at the poetry of humanity and that charity is the virtue most needed nowadays in art and life, yet has not a good word for anybody.

With irony worthy of Swinburne, the writer turned to Buchanan's attacks on Arnold:

And as for this calm throwing of private radiance,³⁴ it is all very well for a young gentleman who sees his way pretty straight to being the poet of humanity, as Anarcharsis Cloutz was its orator, to be calmly radiant, but

³³ While acknowledging the force of both external and internal evidence, Professor Lang does not believe that this can be attributed to Swinburne; he does concede, however, that his hand is detectable in it. I am much indebted to Professor Lang for his kind assistance.

³⁴ Buchanan had deplored J.S. Mill's entry into Parliament because he had lost his independence of thought, in which he had been "calmly throwing the radiance of perfect private sight on the tendencies of his time" (*David Gray*, p. 193).

he ought at least to be mildly forbearing to poor souls³⁵ like Mr. Bright and Mr. Lowe, who though of course they cannot write lovely idyls about costermongers, still do such modest work as they can by repealing corn laws, improving education, and so forth. It will probably occur to most people, in this beautiful talk about calmly throwing your private radiance upon tendencies, that our friend has been reading Mr. Matthew Arnold, has unconsciously pilfered one of Mr. Arnold's central ideas, and then brought it out of his pocket just a little crumpled and soiled. And we should have thought so too, were it not that Mr. Buchanan despises Mr. Matthew Arnold with a contempt that all but chokes him.

There is more in this vein on Arnold, and the irony become more savage yet when the writer turns to consider Buchanan's opinion of Carlyle, "a humbug and a ranter," and concludes that there was

more broad sympathy, more poetry in the 'Essay on Burns' or in a single chapter of the 'French Revolution' than in a whole workhouseful of 'Nells' and 'Megs' and 'Lizes' and other trulls of Mr. Buchanan's frowsy muse.³⁶

The review ends with a passage that anticipates the conclusion to *Under the Microscope* where, too, the serpent Buchanan is doomed "to go upon its belly and eat dust all the days of its life" (Hyder, p. 87):

Literary incompetence is, however, no crime, however gross; and conceit is no crime, however unbearable. But graceless vituperation of the efforts of one's fellow-workers is the offensive sign of a very poor and sour nature. Mr. Buchanan says in his parting quotation that he too must try a way to raise himself from the ground. Precisely; the sooner the better (p. 12).

Arnold was duly grateful for this spirited defence of him and his work, but, in the letter to his mother already cited, he wrote that he had rather it was not done, as these bitter answers increase and perpetuate hatreds which he detested. Not only did Arnold predict Buchanan's immediate response, even discovering that he was said to be "off his centre,"³⁷ but he correctly foresaw Buchanan's

³⁵ David Gray had also been a "poor soul" in "Mr. Arnold's New Poems" in a similar construction.

³⁶ Dramatic monologues by these titles are to be found in *London Poems*, and "trull" seems to have been applied to their speakers by Swinburne in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, as had "costermongers" in the previous quotation.

³⁷ In a note to his edition of *Culture and Anarchy* (Ann Arbor, 1965), p. 445, Professor R. H. Super cites Arnold's letter to his mother of 2 March 1868, in

letter response, directed, as Buchanan may have supposed, at the man behind this anonymous attack, Swinburne's "master," D. G. Rossetti.

In February 1868 W. M. Rossetti's edition of *Poems by Walt Whitman* brought the American to English readers for the first time. Rossetti had considered dedicating the book to Swinburne, whose letter acknowledging his wisdom in not so doing was written the day after "Mr. Swinburne as Critic" appeared.³⁸ In it he wrote:

Of course your dedication would have been a great delight and honour to me, but I think your precaution quite just and necessary, if only because, little as you or I might care for the yelp of mangy anonymous curs, it might impair the success of the thing we want done (Lang, i. 267).

When *Walt Whitman* appeared it was evident that Rossetti, in his Preface, had gone to some trouble, as if to placate an enemy already seen to be dangerous and perhaps "off his centre", to acknowledge that Robert Buchanan, one of the very few "more discerning" critics to appreciate Whitman's poetry, had written an "eulogistic review" in *Broadway*, which should be listed among those few favourable notices Whitman had received in England. It is another of the ironies of the Controversy that Buchanan and the Rossettis and Swinburne should have been such warm supporters of Whitman in England when in America his reputation was not high. In the *Fleshly School of Poetry*, Buchanan tries to explain his apparent inconsistency of championing the outrageous Whitman while attacking Rossetti for similar offences to good taste (as he had to do in court in 1876), but he did commend W. M. Rossetti for excising in his edition the fifty lines of fleshly poetry that Whitman had written (p. 97).

In January 1869 Buchanan, who always admired Swinburne's poetic talent and who may have wished to get on better terms with him, sent him a ticket to his reading of his verse on 25 January.

which he writes of Buchanan having another article on Arnold ready "as soon as he can find an editor to take it." He also heard that "he is going off his centre, poor fellow; about which I must try and learn the truth." Whatever he discovered, Arnold did gently satirise Buchanan's lunatic concept of "Divine Philoprogenitiveness" (*David Gray*, pp. 198-9) in the penultimate chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*.

³⁸ And most of the first paragraph of which Rossetti quoted anonymously in his preface (Lang, i. 270).

Swinburne's polite and remarkably friendly reply regretting that he had received the ticket too late to avail himself of it still survives (Lang, vi. 264). Encouraged by the tone of this letter with the implication that Swinburne, if he then knew of it, had forgiven the epithet "whippersnapper" applied to him in print only a year earlier, or perhaps considered Buchanan to have been satisfactorily answered, Buchanan sent Swinburne a ticket to his next reading, on 3 March, and Swinburne, who was living nearby, met Buchanan at the Hanover Rooms in Hanover Square on that day. It is altogether probable, given their personalities, that this meeting was not altogether a happy one, for soon after this Buchanan mentioned the "intense personal antagonism" between him and Swinburne in a letter to Robert Browning (see above). Swinburne's record of this meeting is to be found, and, hitherto, only found by Robert Buchanan it would seem, in *Under the Microscope*. In his description of the career of Laberius Crispinus in Jonson's *Poetaster* Swinburne described that "'gentleman parcel-poet'" as one

whose life is spent in the struggle to make his way among his betters by a happy alternation and admixture of calumny with servility; one who will fasten himself uninvited on the acquaintance of a superior with fulsome and obtrusive ostentation of good-will; inflict upon his passive and reluctant victim the recitation of his verses in a public place; offer him friendship and alliance against all other poets, so as 'to lift the best of them out of favour' ... (Hyder, pp. 73-4).

In court in June 1876 Buchanan's denial that Swinburne had been invited to the reading "for the purpose of doing [him] a kindness"³⁹ suggests that he read *Under the Microscope* to mean that Swinburne had felt himself to have been used to promote Buchanan's success, and undoubtedly resented Buchanan's importunity. The two men met only on this occasion; and, particularly vulnerable after such a performance and hoping for praise, or something close to it, Buchanan may have found Swinburne, not a dissembler, and one whose admiration for Buchanan's poetic gifts is not on record, to have been less than satisfactory in his frank response to the verses and their reading. Among his friends, Swinburne would have been even more frank, and they might have guessed at Swinburne's effect on Buchanan. Two years later, when

³⁹ *Standard*, 30 June 1876, p. 6.

Swinburne had been lampooned by Mortimer Collins in *Two Plunges for a Pearl*, D. G. Rossetti, who had only just learnt that Thomas Maitland was Buchanan and thus had him in mind when writing to Swinburne, cited as one probable cause for Collins's attack Swinburne's inability to suppress his contempt, "however little he may have been aware of it," when first meeting Collins (DW, 1187); he may have been indirectly reminding Swinburne of his encounter with Buchanan in March 1869.

A signal that whatever truce Swinburne's presence at Buchanan's poetry-reading might have indicated had been ruptured, was given by Buchanan as early as the May 1869 issue of *Broadway*. In an essay on R. W. Emerson, he declared him to be a "Seer" who had lost his audience through his persistent reiteration of his message, and thus, temporarily, "must make way for the new prophet, even the new whipper-snapper, and the new monger of sensational metres" (p. 223).

Perhaps one of many exchanges that took place of which posterity knows nothing, this may help to explain why Rossetti decided to "work the oracle" on behalf of *Poems*, and why he was only strengthened in this resolve on discovering that Buchanan was the writer of the severe anonymous review of W. M. Rossetti's *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in the *Athenaeum* (29 January 1870). Unnecessarily personal if not unjust, the review was answered by William Michael in the next issue. This Buchanan answered; given the opportunity to restate his views he was not the man to deny himself, but in so doing he showed the animus lurking behind them more clearly. Using language which echoes Rossetti's "so poor and pretentious a poetaster" of three years earlier, Buchanan wrote that it was Rossetti's "pretension as a critical commentator" that he had considered in his review and ended by saying that his handling of Shelley's text was "such as to raise grave doubts of his capabilities as a critic of poetry" (*Athenaeum*, 5 February 1870, p. 198). Buchanan paid William Michael back for his wounding remark, but in so doing evidently lost the sympathy of the *Athenaeum's* editor, Norman MacColl, who allowed his journal to play a prominent role on Rossetti's behalf in the Fleshly Controversy.

Despite the fact that Rossetti used Buchanan's known hostility to justify his "working the oracle" and despite the fact that Buchanan did indeed review *Poems* most harshly, it seems reasonably certain that Buchanan was not lying in wait for Rossetti and

was not even provoked into attack by Swinburne's panegyric in the *Fortnight Review*. Rossetti was right in believing Buchanan to be profoundly hostile to him, holding him as leader of the school to be responsible for both Swinburne's excesses, in life and letters, and for William's gibe. In 1866 Buchanan had cited "evil advisers" as responsible for the grossness of *Poems and Ballads*, and Tennyson certainly blamed Rossetti for exerting a harmful influence on Swinburne.⁴⁰ A year later all the world knew of Swinburne's attachment to Adah Isaacs Menken and of Rossetti's offer to her (apparently a fact) of £5 to encompass Swinburn's seduction. Vivid and characteristic evidence of Buchanan's view of Rossetti's baleful influence is to be found in a letter, dated April 1871, to Lord Houghton, only quoted in brief by Houghton's biographer. In it Buchanan deplored "the 'vile set' which Swinburne had 'got among': 'slaves who flatter and pollute him... mean crawlers upon the skirts of literature'."⁴¹ In his well-known letter to Robert Browning of March 1872, Buchanan pleaded guilty "to one instinct of recrimination" and continued, significantly, "When these men, not content with outraging literature, violated the memory of David Gray, I made a religious vow to have no mercy."⁴² So Swinburne's slur on Gray became the responsibility of "the set" and thus, ultimately, that of the head of that "set," D.G. Rossetti, whom years later Buchanan called Swinburne's "master."⁴³ In whatever way knowledge of Buchanan's spite was conveyed to Rossetti, sooner or later he must have considered himself not to have given just cause for that spite.

Yet Rossetti did ask Swinburne to review *Poems*, and thus must have been aware of his new provocations to Buchanan, which are plain enough. For not only did Swinburne begin by discussing what sort of attacks a painter-poet might expect "from the rancorous tribe of weaklings and dullards," and with what blend of "candid envy and judicious ignorance"⁴⁴ such attacks might be informed, but, in his third paragraph reverted to the discussion

⁴⁰ Rossetti's angry letting denying culpability survives (DW, 693).

⁴¹ James Pope-Hennessy, *Monckton-Milnes: The Flight of Youth* (London, 1951), p. 133n.

⁴² T.J. Wise, *A Swinburne Library* (London, 1925), p. 69.

⁴³ *A Look Round Literature* (London, 1887), p. 161.

⁴⁴ "The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Fortnightly Review*, May 1870, p. 551.

that he had begun with his review of Arnold's verse in 1867. By now Swinburne had often been praised for his marvellous technical virtuosity while being blamed for the thin intellectual content of his verse. He characteristically addressed the question:

It is said sometimes that a man may have a strong perfect style who has nothing to convey worth conveyance under cover of it. This is indeed a favourite saying of men who have no words in which to convey the thoughts which they have not; of men born dumb, who express by grunts and chokes the inexpressible eloquence which is not in them, and would fair seem to labour in miscarriage of ideas which they have never conceived. But it remains for them to prove as well as assert that beauty and power of expression can accord with emptiness or sterility of matter, or *that impotence of articulation must imply depth and wealth of thought*.⁴⁵ This flattering unction the very foolishhest of malignants will hardly in this case be able to lay upon the corrosive sore which he calls his soul: the ulcer of ill-will must rot unrelieved by the rancid ointment of such fiction.

In order to antagonize Buchanan further, Swinburne turned from this taunting reference to Gray and his champion to the subject at hand, with yet another gibe at the man he was supposed to stifle:

Hardly could a fool here or a knave there fail to see or hope to deny the fullness of living thought and subtle strength of nature underlying this veil of radiant and harmonious words.

Signalling yet again his purpose, Swinburne continues:

It is on the other side that attack must be looked for from the more ingenious enemies of good work: and of these there was never any lack (pp. 552-3).

Rossetti's style is then discussed at length before Swinburne turns to other matters, and his probable detractor is not again mentioned until Swinburne, beginning his peroration, and, once again reminding Buchanan of his criticism of Gray with this typical inversion, declares that "No tongueless painter or handless poet could be safer from the perils of mixed art" than Rossetti. He almost dares Buchanan to review *Poems* by saying that only another artist equal to Rossetti in both fields "and taintless of jealousy or misconceit" could judge his achievement; "such a judge," Swinburne concluded, "he is not likely to find" (p. 577),

⁴⁵ Italics supplied by the present writer.

and ends his essay by assigning Rossetti the poet a place next only to that of Hugo, and equal to that shared by Tennyson, Browning, Arnold and Morris. In the course of this panegyric he used the epithet "fleshly" four times, once in conjunction with "brotherhood;" no doubt Buchanan found the word here and enjoyed flinging his acolyte's term back in Rossetti's face.

Rossetti's conduct in the spring and summer of 1870 is interesting for the light it throws on his conduct two years later. The victim (as he was convinced, with very good reason) in June 1872 of a conspiracy, Rossetti used that word to describe his manipulation of the reviews of *Poems* in March 1870 (DW, 963). He also saw himself to be waging a "war" (DW, 992 and 1064), but against an enemy who scarcely declared himself. His principle weapon in that war he well knew might be a two-edged sword, though he feared only Swinburne's excessive praise, not his penchant for provocation.⁴⁶ Curiously, W. B. Scott had warned Rossetti in April of using another eager young acolyte, Sidney Colvin, when

⁴⁶ On hearing, on 23 February 1870, that the *Fortnightly Review* was open to Swinburne, Rossetti had written:

"I rejoice to find I am really to have your invaluable support at starting, and don't care what else happens now. Only do, do, my dear best of fellows, remember that I am your friend not only to the purpose of praising what I do to the utmost, which I know surely you will fulfil, but also to the purpose of being on your guard against praising me beyond [my] deserts, which is pretty sure to be your first impulse, I know well (DW, 929)".

Swinburn's reply the following day shows how difficult and irrepressible he could be:

"I stop writing about you for a little while to write to you in reply to your note of yesterday and inform you that having got the chance I have waited ten years for, of speaking out what I see to be truth as regards your poems, I am very particularly and especially well damned if I am going to let it slip. It is my devout intention to cut it fat — as fat as a carver can cut, and yet retain any grace of handling or skill in dissecting. I shall not — to speak Topsaically — say a bloody word that is not the blasted fact" (Lang, ii. 345)

That Rossetti slept no easier from that assurance is testified by a letter from Scalands in which he wished Swinburne to suppress that "one enthusiastic word" (DW, 951) in his review. In William Michael's *Diary* for 5 April he records his brother's "reiterated and strenuous protests... at [Swinburne's] exalting [him] expressly above other contemporary poets..." On 18 April William Michael records Swinburne having "modified" his opinion of Rossetti's "superiority" to Tennyson (DW, 929n), superiority thus being, perhaps, the "one enthusiastic word" Rossetti found unacceptable. Any other qualifications Rossetti may have had about Swinburne's review did not find their way into his letter of gratitude on the appearance of the *Fortnightly* (DW, 1010).

promoting *Poems*.⁴⁷ Colvin was in the process of reviewing *Poems* twice by this date (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April, and the *Westminster Review* for July) and was to review it at least once more (in the *Westminster Review*, January 1871). By 16 May Rossetti was so sure of victory that he could dare to be provocative, and asked his brother to have the *Athenaeum* announce that 1000 copies of *Poems* had been sold in little more than a week: "This might do good and would at any rate put certain people in a rage" (DW, 1029). When the severe reviews finally came, principally Mrs. Oliphant's anonymous review in *Blackwood's* for August, Rossetti could write to his long-time friend F. J. Shields:

The book has prospered quite beyond any expectations of mine, though just lately signs of depreciation have been apparent in the press (*Blackwood* to wit). I am only surprised that nothing of a decided kind in the way of opposition should have appeared before. However, I have also been surprised (and pleasantly) to find such things producing a much more transient and momentary impression of unpleasantness than I should have expected, — indeed I might say none at all... (DW, 1065).

The "impression of unpleasantness" was not quite as transient as Rossetti would have had his friend believe. It is ironic that a year before he moved heaven and earth to discover who Thomas Maitland could be, Rossetti exerted himself to identify his assailant in *Blackwood's*. By 8 September he had been told that the writer was an intimate of his, and, while the pronoun reference is not clear, perhaps even suspected, for obvious reasons, William Morris (DW, 1069). Referring to events in 1872, Professor Fredeman rightly says that "There is... a real possibility that the traditional anonymity of reviewers in Victorian periodicals may have intensified [Rossetti's] sense of a conspiracy" (p. 273n). In 1870 he was capable of suspecting his friends; in 1872 with much evidence to encourage the process, his suspicion developed into acute paranoia.

⁴⁷ In a letter dated 19 April, now at Princeton University, Rossetti replied: "As for Colvin, I do not know that I ever expressed the admiration for him which you seem to think I entertain; though I certainly do think him one of the most cultivated and competent scribes in the press. I have not seen his Durer article but have often thought what he writes open to objections you indicate. However, he has been very friendly and zealous in this matter with me, and if over-enthusiastic and so provoking to my ill-wishers, it is a fault for which I can bear him no grudge, though a dangerous one I admit".

Buchanan probably read Swinburne's review when it appeared, yet his anger at Rossetti's "vile set" and Swinburne's panegyric did not find public expression until March 1871 when reviewing another poet who, like David Gray, had died young without any public recognition and encouragement. The contrast between George Heath's dismal poetic career and that of Rossetti and Swinburne was too much for him. Buchanan's entire case against the Fleshly School is to be found *in parvo* in "George Heath, The Moorland Poet,"⁴⁸ and shows the frame of mind in which he read *Poems* a few months later. In the opening paragraphs Buchanan makes his first known public response to the reception of *Poems* and thus supports W.B. Scott's contention that Rossetti's "working the oracle" may have brought on just what he sought to avoid. Reminded by Heath's career of "the old story," he continues,

At the present moment it comes peculiarly in season: for England happens to be infested at present by a school of poetic thought which threatens frightfully to corrupt, demoralise, and render effeminate the rising generation; a plague from Italy and France; a school aesthetic without vitality, and beautiful without health; a school of falsettoes innumerable—false love, false picture, false patriotism, false religion, false life, false death, all lurking palpable or disguised in the poisoned chalice of a false style. Just when the latter Della Cruscan school is blooming out in the full hectic flush of mutual admiration which is the due preliminary to sudden death, just when verse-writers who never lived are bitterly regretting that it is necessary to die, and thinking the best preparation is to grimace at God and violate the dead, it may do us good to read the old story over again... (pp. 170-1).

Swinburne saw the piece and refers to it in *Under the Microscope* (Hyder p. 75). And later in the essay Buchanan picked up Swinburne's covert challenge of the previous year and sought to demonstrate Gray's "supreme poetic workmanship," to which passage this footnote is added:

Mr. Algernon Charles Swinburne, author of "Atalanta in Calydon," went some years ago far out of his way to call David Gray a "dumb poet"—meaning by that a person with great poetical feeling, but no adequate powers of expression. So many excellent critics have resented both this impertinence and the unfeeling language in which it was expressed, that Mr. Swinburne is doubtless ashamed enough of his words by this time; but would it not have been as well if, before vilifying a dead

⁴⁸ *Good Words*, March 1871, pp. 170-177.

man, he had first read his works, which, if they possess any characteristic whatever, are noticeable for crystalline perfection of poetic form, unparalleled felicity of epithet (witness the one word "sov'reign" as applied to the cry of the cuckoo), and emotion always expressed in simple music? When Mr. Swinburne and the school he follows are consigned to the limbo of *affettuosos*, David Gray's dying sonnets will be part of the literature of humanity. (p. 175n).

Since Swinburne acknowledged twice in his review of Rossetti his own and Morris's early debt to "their leader and best man" (pp. 567 and 568), he may have resented, as Rossetti may have done, the implication (which he had long since denied) that his verse was still written under Rossetti's influence. But Buchanan now wished to show that whatever uneasy truce had been briefly honoured during 1869 was over; the "personal antagonism" had become too "intense."

The second part of this article will be published in the following number of the *Bulletin*.