

The Pre-Raphaelites

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The writings of William Morris and Christina Rossetti have continued to sustain critical interest, but it has been a sparse year for study of Christina's brother Dante. His life and poetry have much to offer to reevaluations of aestheticism and its sources, study of gender and class malaise, and the politics of audience, but prospective titles such as *Dante G. Rossetti and the Colonial Gaze*; *Dante Rossetti and the Dissolution of Certainty*; and *Dante G. Rossetti and the Performance of Gender* remain gleams in the critical eye.

Meanwhile, of course, we must consider really existing works. Recent articles and books about William Morris have continued to examine interrelations between his poetry and social ideas and extend knowledge of his familial and artistic associations. Articles devoted to Christina Rossetti have continued to offer conjectures about her religious and literary sources, and to interpret possible feminist and assertive aspects of her work.

Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's "The Representation of Violence/the Violence of Representation: Housman's Illustrations to Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'" (ESC 19: 305-328) draws sweeping parallels between the distortions of *Playboy* illustrations of *Goblin Market* and academic criticism, and comments more tellingly on the implications of Laurence Housman's illustrations of the poem, which depict the goblins as female. Kooistra argues persuasively that these caricatures suppressed the poem's "moral discourse" and recast a "violent story of physical abuse as the story of female hysteria." Her examples suggest that "interpretation" may indeed take extreme and hostilely parodic forms, when illustrators dislike the apparent meaning of what they depict, and/or set out to subvert the tone or significance of sexually charged passages by writers of the opposite sex.

Joel Westerholm's "'I Magnify Mine Office': Christina Rossetti's Authoritative Voice in her Devotional Prose" (VN 84: 11-17) and Virginia Sickbert's "Christina Rossetti and Victorian Children's Poetry: A Maternal Challenge to the Patriarchal Family" (VP 31: 385-410) offer contextually informed close readings of little-known works. "I Magnify Mine Office" observes that Rossetti's devotional prose quietly overstepped restrictions on women's religious authority imposed by Tractarian leaders such as H. P. Liddon. Despite Rossetti's many disclaimers in *Seek and Find* (1879), *Letter and Spirit* (1883), and *The*

Face of the Deep (1893), her sermon-like manner, practice of biblical exegesis, and appeals to God as the source of her authority clearly contravened contemporary prescriptions against women's writing of theology. In her biblical commentary, for example, Rossetti modified the standard Pauline parallel between Jesus and the husband to make women's Christian mission closer to that of Christ, and her interpretations of other biblical stories—that of Deborah, among others—celebrated an occasional prophetic role for women. Westerholm concludes that Rossetti's gestures of resistance added internal tensions to her theological prose: "that an Oxford-Movement Anglican woman wrote devotional studies is a surprise; that she sometimes did so boldly is a matter for wonder and admiration."

Sickbert's "Christina Rossetti and Victorian Children's Poetry" justly praises the poet's verses for children for their realism, freedom from censoriousness and authoritarian rhetoric, and unsententious celebration of a loving and egalitarian mother-child bond. She also observes that Rossetti used at the midpoint of the *Monna Innominata* cycle a description of ideal reciprocal love taken directly from her own *Sing-Song*: "'Love me, for I love you'—and answer me, / 'Love me, for I love you.'" Sickbert sometimes imposes "strong" interpretation on Rossetti's lines, but her readings of other Rossetti poems and many contrasting examples from nineteenth-century children's literature support her view that Rossetti's verses celebrated a family circle from which the father is (benevolently) absent, and in which the mother encourages her daughter to value independence and reciprocity rather than submissive marriage. Against the standard exemplars of Victorian family life devoted to "moral reform, paternal authority, and sexual repression," Sickbert claims, Rossetti's poetry for children "offers an alternative story about Victorian parent-child relations."

In "Feminine and Poetic Privacy in Christina Rossetti's 'Autumn' and 'A Royal Princess'" (VP 31: 187-202), Kathy Alexis Psomiades explores the hypothesis that Rossetti's "Autumn" may be read as a reaction against her brother Dante's illustrations for the Moxon Tennyson. It is possible to interpret Christina Rossetti's poem without reference to Dante's drawings for "The Lady of Shalott" or to Tennyson's poem, but Psomiades' readings bring forth some of the tensions evoked for women poets by male poetic images of women.

Psomiades' observations about the anxieties privacy imposes on Rossetti's woman speaker further lead her to conclude that "Autumn" evinces both Rossetti's "distance from the erotic plot and her hostility toward that plot," and that "A Royal Princess" "comes very close indeed to examining the political basis of privacy." The princess' de-

cision to sacrifice herself to the rebellious masses to save her father undercuts her status as a potential revolutionary, however, and Psomiades interprets the scene as yet another reduction of woman poet to artifact. In her conclusion, she observes that Rossetti's focus on the split between artistic and public spheres also anticipated a substantive preoccupation of fin-de-siècle aestheticism.

In "Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and *Goblin Market*" (VP 31: 79-93), Mary Arseneau reviews Rossetti's "sacramentalist" remarks about the need to perceive within nature immanent symbols of the divine, and interprets *Goblin Market* as an allegory "not . . . of a sexual fall, but . . . of a turning away from God." Arseneau fails to acknowledge the complementarity of previous interpretations with her own, but her reading is consistent with Rossetti's writings and terminology.

Articles on the early poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti that have appeared this year include Ernest Fontana's "Fragment and Disease: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'The Bride's Prelude'" (JPRS N.S. 2, no. 2: 5-11), and Catherine Maxwell's "'Devious Symbols': Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Purgatorio" (VP 31: 19-40). "The Bride's Prelude" is often considered one of Rossetti's least satisfactory poems, and Fontana dwells on its "experimental" nature in "Fragment and Disease . . .," noting that Rossetti made plans to complete this fragment at several points, but was never able to do so. Fontana also uses the word "fragment" as a pedal point—calling the poem a "true fragment," for example, in its inability to suggest a concordant resolution to the stifling mental states of its protagonist, Aloise (called in the article Alonse). Thus identified, this "fragment" becomes a "diseased text," which points to "the repressiveness of healthy narratives," achieves narrative closure by avoiding the "terrible silences" of actual speech, and merits praise for its "vividly disoriented and disorienting representation of feeling expressed in an unusual economy of language."

Fontana does not tell us why Rossetti projected these disorienting representations onto a passive, virtuous, and psychically tormented heroine, however, or why he was unable to construct a satisfactory account of her relationship with her erratic and violent lover, and why he struggled in vain to bring this exemplarily "diseased" text to some sort of narrative conclusion. More sustained attempts to answer these questions might bring further illumination to the fragmented, confessional, and inhibited linguistic disclosures of Rossetti's work.

Catherine Maxwell's careful consideration of the image of the "woodspurge" lays to rest forever naive assumptions that the poem's "cup of three" could have been solely a natural image. Beginning with

the image of the "spurge" in Gerard's *Herball*, Maxwell elucidates some of the purgative, anti-Romantic, and allegorical associations Rossetti may have brought to the image from his reading.

Maxwell makes no mention of earlier typological and religious readings of this poem, but adduces a complex series of plausible associations for Rossetti's image, including Tractarian and Ruskinian descriptions of natural symbols, Browning's poem "Garden Fancy: The Flower's Name," the woodcuts of Francesco Colonna's 1499 *Poliphili Hypnerotonmachia*, and the purgation of Dante's *Purgatorio*. She concludes that "'The Woodspurge' is a conversion poem, marking a move from one phase of Rossetti's writing to another. . . . Thus the poem's unromantic wisdom is that Rossetti's readers will not 'see . . . Heaven in a wild flower' without experiencing his Purgatory first." "Devious Symbols'"s daedal allusions and "intertextual" associations may sometimes be overextended, after the manner of J. L. Lowes's *Road to Xanadu*. At their most persuasive, however, they contribute to the interpretation of Rossetti's poetry in artful, informed ways.

A different sort of contribution appears in Roger Simpson's "In Defence of William Fulford: A Minor Pre-Raphaelite Poet" (JPRS N.S. 2, no. 2: 21-27). Fulford—editor of *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, and friend in his youth of Morris, Burne-Jones, and R. W. Dixon—has long been dismissed as a prolix and inferior poet, who abandoned literary pursuits for a religious career. On the contrary, Simpson argues, Fulford's contributions to *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* and his later *Songs of Life* (1859); *Saul, a Dramatic Poem; Elizabeth, an Historical Ode, and Other Poems* (1862); and *Lancelot: with Sonnets and Other Poems* (1865) express mature respect for the vocation of poet, draw on a wide range of sources, and use a variety of personae, old and young, men and women. Simpson comments that Fulford also evinced a consistent interest in female romantic psychology and the problems of women. He wrote sympathetic poems about Guinevere and Lancelot, Helen and Paris, and—rather remarkably for the period—Judith's slaying of Holofernes. Fulford deserves his tiny meed of memory, and Simpson persuades the reader that "the evidence of the 1862 and 1865 volumes testifies to Fulford's increasing commitment to literature and painting in a manner directly consonant with the aesthetic values and subjects of the second wave of Pre-Raphaelites."

Isobel Armstrong's long interpretive survey of *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (Routledge) gives brief notice to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but devotes a chapter—entitled "A New Radical Aesthetic: The Grotesque as Cultural Critique"—to the early poetry

of William Morris. Of the "grotesque" in *The Defence of Guenevere* in particular, Armstrong remarks that "[Like Arnold and Clough] Morris . . . contends with an individualist and expressive account of poetry and dissents from it. But whereas they orientate themselves through redefining a classical tradition, Morris deliberately aligned himself with what might be called a 'gothic' reading of culture. Morris's poems ask for dissent and shock by enabling a reader to see the distortions of Grotesque vision even while he remains within them" (pp. 232, 251). Armstrong makes no mention of Morris' later poetry, a surprising omission for a book on "poetics and politics," for such later works as *Sigurd the Volsung* or *The Pilgrims of Hope* contain much that is experimental and political.

Jeffrey Skoblow's study, *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, Art* (Univ. Press of Virginia), offers an interpretive critique of *The Earthly Paradise*, and an extended view of Morris' political ideals through the lens of Frankfurt School criticism. Skoblow's examination of Morris' political writings is lucid and appreciative, but he is also quite selective in his choice of texts. Essentially unmentioned, for example, are *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *News from Nowhere*, and several of Morris' later writings which specifically address the relation of politics and art.

Paradise Dislocated is physically well-produced, with visually arresting subtitles, and facsimile pages from the Kelmscott edition of "The Hill of Venus" (which Skoblow discusses at length) reprinted verso through the volume. Skoblow accepts (too readily, I believe) contemporary criticisms of *The Earthly Paradise* as "escapist," excessive, or monotonous. But he does employ them at times for extended dialectical outbursts of prose-poetry:

The Earthly Paradise is an Earthly Paradise—by definition so to speak. *The* is the author's joke in the face of death, his pathetic, self-mocking stab at hegemony. But as a paradise, poor as it is, bound between covers, Morris' work embodies a critical imagination of possibility: a collectivity of fragments, a protraction of (enfeebled) love, a suasion to the acentric, to the cyclical, to "changeless change"—tales told, lives embodied, against all odds, and then, but not finally, forgotten. The poem "marks the spot where something painful is buried" and in doing so makes a judgment on its bored reader's interest, that capitalist tool. A burial: boredom means loss, and promises (or hints at promising) the return of the repressed. It judges us wanting, "a dawning awareness of ourselves as well" (or an awareness locked in night), an awareness of our boundaries realized in awareness of something beyond them." (p. 18)

In effect, Skoblow's work is an extended attempt to appreciate Morris' revolutionary dialectic in the political language of another century—an interim report from Nowhere, drafted by a critic who does not stay to report on the details of formal aspects of Morris' work (say), or its preoccupation with historical legends. Morris himself might have considered it a wry homage to his own advice, "Read [the earlier version] through, then shut the book and write in your own way."

The year's articles on Morris provide their own insights, some of them unexpected. David and Sheila Latham's "William Morris: an annotated bibliography 1990-91" (*JWMS* 10, no. 3: i-xxvii), for example, annotates no fewer than 189 articles and books which include discussions of some aspect of Morris' life or work. Alexander MacDonald's "The Liveliness of *News from Nowhere*: Structure, Language and Allusion" (*JWMS* 10, no. 2) considers some of the interpretive ambiguities of Morris' best-known utopian romance. In "Morris and Music" (*JWMS* 10, no. 3: 6-9), Lesley Baker considers the political significance of Morris' responses to the medieval songs, ballads, and other forms of popular vocal and instrumental music that appealed to his love of unpretentious communal art. And in "The Private Voice of May Morris" (*JPRS* N.S. 2, no. 2:28-37), Janis Londraville reprints May Morris' letters to the American lawyer and literary patron John Quinn. May inherited something of her father's gift of language, and her descriptions of her life at Kelmscott reveal a sense of her father's continuing presence: "And he is here constantly, John. I never lose the sense of it: at a turn of the garden I hear his footstep on the gravel—and hear it without surprise; the shock is, to come back to the present."

Sue Mooney's "Self-Revelation in Morris's Unfinished Novel" (*JWMS* 10, no. 2: 2-9) interprets Morris' fragmentary *Novel on Blue Paper* as an account of Morris' early attachment to Georgiana Burne-Jones, suppressed after her engagement to Burne-Jones in the interests of friendship, but revived for a time when Edward Burne-Jones' extramarital affairs put his wife's affection and his friend's loyalty under strain. Mooney offers in evidence for her analysis the guarded nature of Georgiana Burne-Jones's recollections of her adolescent acquaintance with Morris, and her destruction of all the letters Morris wrote to her before 1876. She observes the novel's pointed expressions of empathy for the disadvantages under which nineteenth-century married women labored, and concludes that "one is faced with a very different picture of Morris in the early 1870s from the commonly held view of a somewhat comic figure, too engrossed in his work to pay much heed to his wife's infidelity and, in any case, largely indifferent to women; instead we see a deeply thoughtful and ardent man, a nature in which the capacity to experience private passion is balanced with sensitivity and sympathy—a great-heartedness that enabled him to think in social and not simply personal terms." It will be interesting to see how the next generation of revisionist biographers will respond to Mooney's conjectures.

Finally, Frank C. Sharp's "A Lesson in International Relations: Morris and the SPAB" (*JWMS* 10, no. 2: 9-15) gives a lively and interesting account of Morris' activities as a propagandist for the "Anti-Scrape." Sharp traces Morris' leadership of an effort to persuade the Italian government to desist from altering the mosaics and front of St. Mark's in Venice, and shows that Morris learned swiftly from early mistakes to modify radically his methods of dealing with foreign governments. Noting possible parallels with the techniques of twentieth-century first-world conservationists, Sharp remarks that "we tend to think of Morris as uniformly liberal and progressive. It has become almost axiomatic to characterize Morris as unaffected by the nationalistic attitudes of his time. However, an examination of Morris's early efforts in foreign countries on behalf of SPAB reveals that he was originally far from untainted by British chauvinism. Morris's attitudes were radically changed by his initial experiences in furthering architectural preservation abroad."

Writing this year's review has prompted me to reflect on a few of the changes that have transformed Pre-Raphaelite criticism since I began to draft *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti* about a quarter of a century ago. In the late sixties I did not guess how many acute moral, religious, historical, biographical, and psychological readings the writings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's younger sister might evoke; or how much more critical interest *Goblin Market* might come to arouse than "The Blessed Damozel"; or how critically axiomatic it might become to value the exemplary aspects of Christina Rossetti's outwardly uneventful unmarried life.

One potentially useful aspect of early- and mid-century literary criticism, however, was its willingness—in B. Ifor Evans' *English Literature of the Later Nineteenth Century*, for example, or Lionel Stevenson's *The Pre-Raphaelites*—to examine the writings of "the Pre-Raphaelites" as a group. It would seem to me appropriate now to attempt one or more such reassessments of literary Pre-Raphaelitism as a (no doubt specious) whole—with comparative analyses of the contributions of several writers, including the uncanonized and uncanonizable—and reevaluate their collective contributions to the many diverging aesthetic and ideological strains of their fin-de-siècle and twentieth-century modernist successors.

Swinburne

MARGOT K. LOUIS

Not every year sees a new book in Swinburne studies, let alone an excellent book; so it is gratifying to have *The Whole Music of Passion: New Essays on Swinburne*, ed. Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton, from Scolar Press. The tone of the collection is mildly embattled, as is the field of Swinburne studies. The editors cheerfully remark in their introduction that, "though still by no means a canonical author, Swinburne has begun to establish himself as an indispensable point of reference, at least in the academic discussion of Victorian poetry" (p. viii); but Rooksby in his opening article, "A Century of Swinburne," points out that "standard reference books and potted literary histories" are still trotting out tired old clichés from early modernist attacks on Swinburne (p. 1). Rooksby's summation of Swinburne criticism is generally sound and witty, and his insistence on viewing Swinburne as more than "a poet of disembodied words" (p. 19) is salutary, though perhaps overstated.

One particularly appealing feature of *The Whole Music of Passion* is the way in which it contextualizes Swinburne, looks before and after: there are essays on Swinburne's Romantic roots, on Swinburne's interaction with contemporary Victorian writers and genres, on Swinburne's influence (still a much-neglected topic). Besides all this, we are given an article on *Tristram of Lyonesse* (also unduly neglected), a close analysis of Swinburne's method of composition in "Anactoria," and, as a bonus, three "unpublished" early poems in an appendix. These include the full text of "King Ban," an early draft for parts of "The Two Dreams" (entitled at this stage "The White Hind"), and the full text of "By the sea-side"—much the most interesting work of the three. Here we find a Swinburne closely observant of the details of nature, in a way paralleled elsewhere in his oeuvre only by "The Sundew":

Do you not see, whene'er a sunbeam dips
Thro' dull-green water sifted,
How, where one stagnant weed-tuft hangs and drips,
The sea-fan heaves loose-drifted? (p. 177; ll. 33-36)

The poem is also interesting as an anticipation of "The Triumph of Time" (since it describes a very similar situation, geographically and romantically) and as an example of Swinburne's fascination with *femmes fatales*, since there is an ardent digression on Lucrezia Borgia.