

ROSSETTI AND HIS MODELS

A friend, Val Prinsep, described D. G. Rossetti as follows: "Rossetti was unlike anyone I ever met. He was an Italian of the fourteenth century who happened to reside in London. He was shrewd, as are all Italians, in making a bargain; no one ever got the better of him. He managed his patrons in the most masterly way . . . [T]hough he lived in an atmosphere of his own, in a kind of medieval dreamland, he delighted in searching for human nature in the London he loved."¹ Of all the Pre-Raphaelite painters, Rossetti enlarged the theory of the characteristic model the most, creating a personal iconography from his choice of model and his wedding of the actual woman to a symbolic representation. Rossetti was criticized in his lifetime for always showing the same type of model, but his brother William averred that fourteen models sat for Rossetti.² According to my own count, Rossetti's models included fourteen women and ten men.³

Rossetti began his painting career by using his pious mother and sister (fig. 1) for St. Anne and the Virgin Mary (The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, 1848-49), with a family handyman, "old Williams," posing in the background. Even in this early work he included a number of symbolic references: the little angel holding a lily (purity), the books representing Christian virtues, the dove (Holy Spirit), the lily being embroidered by the virgin and the vines in the background, symbolic of both Christ ("I am the vine . . .") and the wine of the Eucharist. Rossetti accompanied the painting with two sonnets explaining its meaning, a practice he was to continue. It has been suggested that his choice of models here was also prophetic, his first model being his mother who, by a fascinating dialectics, became the precursor of a series of venerated though not so venerable goddesses.⁴

About his labor on Ecce Ancilla Domini, which he was retouching in January, 1853, Rossetti wrote in a letter to Ford Madox Brown: "This blessed afternoon the blessed white eyesore will be finished . . . Yesterday after giving up the Angel's head as a bad job (owing to William's malevolent expression) at about one o'clock I took to working it up out of my own intelligence, and got it better by a great deal than it has been yet."⁵ The sitter for the shrinking Virgin was again Christina Rossetti, and the features of the angel were a composite from a professional model named Maitland, William Rossetti, and the hair of Thomas Woolner.⁶

One day, when Rossetti was drawing in Hunt's studio, Walter Deverell, a former fellow student, broke in and said, "You fellows can't tell