## D. G. ROSSETTI'S FOUND AND THE BLESSED DAMOZEL AS EXPLORATIONS IN VICTORIAN PSYCHOSEXUALITY

The concept of the beloved woman, viewed through the lens of conventional Victorian attitudes, received its most popular expression in Coventry Patmore's famous poem The Angel in the House. Although this image may seem grossly simplistic and sentimental at first sight, it is nevertheless an important index to the nature of Victorian psychosexuality and suggests that the Victorian attitude toward love and women was, in fact, self-divided and complex. That the Victorians were haunted by the spectre of change which threatened to undermine the ethical foundations of their society has by now become a truism. Increasingly, the home and woman as mother and wife came to be seen as the only remaining sources of moral virtue available to man. Consequently, feminine duty became inextricably involved in man's spiritual salvation, and the purity of women became an almost obsessive concern for social critics, writers, and artists.[1]

The visual and poetic works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, however, clearly do not address the issue of feminine sexuality in a manner consistent with Victorian attitudes toward women. Instead, his feminine images betray the poet-artist's firm belief in the values of private vision. In both his painting and his poetry, Rossetti uses the beloved woman as a symbol for his own romantic metaphysic; she becomes an objectification of the artist's denial of philosophical dualism; to him, the physical and the spiritual are one: "Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor / Thee from myself, neither our love from God" ("Heart's Hope"). While his contemporaries seem bent on etherealizing women, Rossetti insists that it is her physical and even sexual nature which gives her the power to be man's spiritual guide. Although this is clearly at odds with the rigidity of Victorian morals, Rossetti's equation of sexuality and spirituality was neither new nor necessarily blasphemous, for intensely religious poets like John Donne long before had used sexual ecstasy as a metaphor for spiritual transcendence. Ironically, what is most interesting -- and most disturbing -- about Rossetti's use of the feminine image is that it tells us a good deal about the psychosexual complexities of the average Victorian. Rossetti's apparent disregard for public taste and morality allowed him to explore more freely and honestly what artists like Tennyson could deal with only covertly and intuitively: the dreaded fear of "twy-natured love"[2] which may as easily lead to a man's destruction as to his salvation. As such, Rossetti's women become far more than mere symbols of an abstract philosophy. They are projected images of the Victorian psyche which sought salvation through love yet feared its sexual nature. A com-