

"DECODING" ROSSETTI: SONNETS II AND III
OF THE HOUSE OF LIFE

Few, I think, would deny that Dante Gabriel Rossetti can be an exceedingly obscure poet. If to his mind a sonnet is "a moment's monument," his own, to our eyes, often appear to be difficult puzzles, and, as Richard L. Stein remarks, "the process of interpretation frequently becomes an exercise in decoding."¹ Nor are the standard commentaries as helpful as one might wish. Paull Franklin Baum, for example, asserts that the concluding lines of "Bridal Birth," the second sonnet in The House of Life, describe "the ultimate spiritual rebirth of the lovers from the bridal of Love and Death."² The phrase has a fine ring to it, but, as with the lines it is meant to explicate, it leaves one wondering just what, exactly, it means. Even Stein, whose analysis of the poem is one of the best, admits that much of it is "hard to see," especially its final conceit.³

While each of the sonnets in The House of Life seems to demand individual explication, none can be fully understood independently of the whole. Rossetti's care in arranging and rearranging the poems is well-known; just as each sonnet contributes to the development of the sequence as a whole, so the pattern of the whole illuminates each individual sonnet. Briefly, the sequence follows a young man through a love affair that is both fulfilled and fulfilling but which ends in the death of the beloved, whereupon the speaker falls in love again (Sonnets I-XXXVI). In contrast to the first, this second love is frustrated and furtive. The speaker at once attempts to recapture the ideal benefits he feels he had derived from his first love and begins to be tormented by shattering doubts about their validity, to question the very "religion" of love he had himself propounded. Sexual love is no longer the principle of Life but the handmaiden of Death (XXXVII-XLVIII). In the celebrated "Willowwood" series (XLIX-LII) the speaker obtains a brief moment of partial (though ominous) rest and catharsis, after which he reflects upon his experiences and shifts his idealistic allegiance from love to art (LIII-LIX). Part II opens, appropriately, with a series of sonnets on the nature of poetry, culminating in a sonnet which, ironically, casts doubt upon the very basis or even possibility of art itself (LX-LXIII). Defeated in his attempts to find unity and integrity in himself, experience, love or art, the speaker drifts from "inclusiveness" (LXIII) to inconclusiveness, a shattered self "lost," in his famous phrase, "on both sides," tragically deferring all to the one, wan hope of an afterlife in which all may be made whole and well (LXIV-CI).⁴

Part I is itself divided into two sections; one is tempted to break Rossetti's own heading apart and label the first "Youth" and