

ARNOLD AND ROSSETTI: TWO VOICES
IN SWINBURNE'S "THE TRIUMPH OF TIME"

Apropos of Matthew Arnold and D. G. Rossetti in a letter to Theodore Watts, Swinburne complains that "those two admirable poets, to my lifelong perplexity and disgust, can see nothing almost in each other's work to admire or enjoy. 'It is really singular' as Mme. de Sévigné's candid and charming old friend said to her 'that I should be the one only person in the world whose judgment is invariably right' -- is it not?"¹ Yet readers of Arnold and Rossetti might be less surprised at the inability of poets so different to admire each other's work than at Swinburne's gratitude and enthusiasm toward them both. Arnold and Rossetti, of course, recognized their differences,² but for Swinburne each was an important inspiration and influence: Rossetti was not only Swinburne's close friend and housemate, but also, for him, the greatest poetic stylist of the day;³ and of Arnold he says, "I cannot reckon the help and guidance in thought and work, which I owe him as to all other real and noble artists whose influence it was my fortune to feel when most susceptible of influence, and least conscious of it, and most in want."⁴

How he reconciled the influences of two such different voices is not explained in Swinburne's criticism; indeed, he seems to praise Arnold and Rossetti for antithetical qualities. Thus, he is impressed by writers like Arnold because, "Above all they have air; you can breathe and move in their landscape" ("Arnold's New Poems," 77-78). On the other hand, he admires the sense of breathless, motionless absorption that Rossetti creates at his most intense moments of "ardent harmony": "Spirit and sense together, eyesight and hearing and thought, are absorbed in the splendour of sounds and glory of colours distinguishable only by delight" ("Poems of DGR," 7).

What Swinburne seems to be getting at in these contrasting references to the airiness of Arnold's landscape and the intense absorption in Rossetti's is the extent to which each poet allows -- indeed, requires -- things to be separate and distinct. For Arnold, as Swinburne understood, the physical landscape is independent: "Man's welfare -- his highest sphere and state of spiritual well-doing and well-being -- this indeed is his true aim, but not this is the aim of nature: the world has other work than this to do; and we, not it, must submit; submit not by ceasing to attempt and achieve the best we can, but by ceasing to expect subservience to our own ends from all forces and influences of existing things" ("Arnold's New Poems," 27). It is true that for Arnold all creation is part of the All,