

FULLNESS AND DISSOLUTION: THE POETIC STYLE OF
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

The "arduous fulness"¹ of The House of Life is an intensity on the edge of dissolution, for Rossetti's need to form a 'moment's monument' both arises from and ends in his sense of the shadowiness of life and lives. Pater's assertion that in Rossetti's work "the great affections of persons for each other . . . formed the great undeniable reality in things, the solid resisting substance"² is a partial truth completed in Wilde's lament that "when one looks back upon the life that was so vivid in its emotional intensity . . . it all seems to be a dream and an illusion."³ In The House of Life, memory alternately vanishes and appears with the haunting intensity of "all that golden hair undimmed in death" (XXXVI) -- and as it does, the present itself solidifies and dissolves.

Rossetti's sense of the moment is clarified in "Eden Bower," his deeply personal and yet essentially Victorian version of the Fall. Parted from Adam, the enraged Lilith begs her former lover, the serpent, for his shape and prophesies her temptation of Eve, the expulsion from Eden, and the murder of brother by brother. The vengeful and inescapable past, that is, destroys the eternal present, creating time and loss. The general relevance for Rossetti's (or any) life is clear, though specific application is unwise. By 1869 when this poem was written, his true wife Eve might just as easily have seemed to be Jane Morris -- or no one at all -- as Elizabeth Siddal, and certainly Rossetti never quite identified Lilith. Fanny Cornforth sat for the original Lady Lilith (1868), but her head was replaced with that of Alexa Wilding in 1872-3 and the description in The House of Life of "Adam's first wife" as "subtly of herself contemplative" (LXXVIII) suggests Lilith, or any of Rossetti's models, more than it does Fanny. Such confusions, however, are part of the point of all Rossetti's poetry, for as Baum says of the sonnets, "he does not wish us to keep the two loves separate, and therefore he himself interweaves them."⁴

Rossetti, indeed, could not keep them separate. In his life and art, loves overlap. Both past and present are multilayered. The past like a palimpsest blurs the outlines of the present. "Meshed with half-remembrance hard to free" (L), each moment is half unreal, half past. "The present is and is not," says "The Cloud Confines" and the poet finds it impossible to tell whether his free-floating sorrow is "fresh storm" or "old rain the covert bears" (LXVIII). Noting that The House of Life is largely in the "retrospective mood" and that it "surveys the crises of his life," William E. Fredeman calls it "Rossetti's In Memoriam."⁵ It should be added that the poem is elegiac not only in its attitude toward the past but in its sense of the pres-