

## TWO DGR INTERPRETATIONS

## I

INTELLECTUAL CONTENT IN ROSSETTI'S POETRY:  
A NEW READING OF "SISTER HELEN"

It is generally recognized that Rossetti was a highly accomplished writer of verse, but the prevailing attitude among critics is that his poetry lacks thematic depth. A critic who wishes to establish him as a major poet will have to tackle precisely this issue. The case against Rossetti has been stated compactly by Harold Weatherby: "Rossetti was capable both of variety and intensity, genuinely a poet, capable of rendering feeling as language. It is too often, though, exactly that and no more -- just good poetry; he wrote only a few good poems. For despite his conscious effort at the creation of poetic forms, his content, which in the final analysis is the only thing that can validate form, often failed him. Or he failed it."<sup>1</sup>

And yet Rossetti himself insisted on intellectuality in poetry. In an important letter to Hall Caine, he wrote:

You have too great a habit of speaking of special octave, sestet, or line. Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes the difference in all art. Work your metal as much as you like, but first take care that it is worth working.<sup>2</sup>

Rossetti's idea of fundamental brainwork in poetry is one of his best-known dictums, and has been surprisingly ignored by most of his critics. "Sister Helen,"<sup>3</sup> for instance, is generally praised as a perfect imitation of the ballad form, but no one has bothered to search for the fundamental brainwork at its core that made Rossetti consider the poem worth writing. In the present article, I wish to show that "Sister Helen" has deep intellectual content and suggest that, in its intellectuality, it is characteristic of Rossetti's verse as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

"Sister Helen" is usually read as a poem about witchcraft in which a young peasant girl, rejected by her aristocratic lover, resorts to black magic, thus destroying him and damning both his soul and hers. Such a view, however, assumes that the poem is related by an omniscient narrator, and ignores the stylistic subtleties of the refrain. In fact, Rossetti's poem is a complex one whose meaning becomes evident only when we realize that its narrator is actu-