

REVIEWS

Rossetti: Painter and Poet by J.B. Bullen. London: Frances Lincoln, 2011. 272 pp. + 180 colour plates. ISBN 978-0-7112-3225-9. £35.00; \$50.00.

One of the chief problems for biographers and critics who seek to recount the life and interpret the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti is to reconcile the contradictory parts of his personality: his spirituality and sensuality, his coldness and passion, his energy and lassitude, his unselfish encouragement of younger contemporaries and occasional bitter rivalry with peers. Adding to these apparent dualities are his twin achievements in literature and painting, his notable experiments in design in several fields, and his contributions to scholarship, to criticism, and to translation of medieval Italian poetry.

Many viewers of Rossetti's paintings have had the same conflicted responses as the critic, collector, and sometime artist W. Graham Robertson, who recorded his feelings about Rossetti's work in his autobiography *Time Was* (1931). Robertson's initial puzzlement, even revulsion, when confronted with "*bad, ill-painted, ill-drawn pictures*" (his emphasis), which he found "hot and heavy in colour," was suddenly replaced by admiration. A bewitchment, which Robertson describes as "the glamour," fell upon him as it did upon many of his contemporaries; as a result, the paintings were transformed into beautiful fantasies. In a particularly illuminating observation, Robertson summed up the artist's peculiar power: "Any intelligent art student could out-paint Rossetti, nearly any member of a life class could draw better, and yet what they would produce would be of no import, while his slightest scribble is full of suggestion." It was not Rossetti's several technical failures that were important but rather his success in overcoming them; as viewers, we are compelled to overlook these supposed failures and to look beneath the surface and into the work, perceiving depths where formerly we might have suspected shallowness.

Rossetti missed out on much of the vitriolic criticism that greeted the discovery of his fellow Pre-Raphaelites on their first showings at the Royal Academy between 1850 and 1851, but this escape came at the expense of his later career. For example, he was not invited to contribute to the Manchester International Exhibition in 1857, although Brown, Millais, and Hunt were. His reputation was spread chiefly by the enthusiasm of private collectors rather than through public exhibition and review. However, whether he could have sustained the kind of public fame and respectability earned by his former Pre-Raphaelite Brothers is doubtful. Drug dependency, obsession, and paranoia militated against convention and career. Nonetheless, Rossetti's work