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## Whispering Likenesses: Images of Christina Rossetti, 1847-1853

In William Michael Rossetti's edition of Christina Rossetti's complete poetical works—published a decade after her death—he chose the year 1847 as the boundary between his sister's adolescent phase and that of her artistic maturity. His division was based upon a critical view of Christina's poetry, the quality of which, after 1847, would not justify its being grouped under the heading "juvenilia." If we accept William's decision to grant Christina intellectual or poetic maturity on her seventeenth birthday, December 5, 1847, we can easily accept as corroboration a similar assertion, though in a different medium and touching upon a more personal aspect of Christina's life, a visual assertion or observation made by her brother, Dante Gabriel.<sup>1</sup> Comparing his two early portraits of Christina, one drawn sometime around 1846, the other completed in 1847, it is clear that Christina attained physical as well as intellectual maturity during her seventeenth year.<sup>2</sup> Absent from the later likeness is any trace of adolescence; what remains are the rather lovely features of a young woman who was, after all—and not merely because a family member and therefore eminently available—Dante Gabriel Rossetti's most prominent model throughout the early years of his career as a painter when intimately involved with the Pre-Raphaelite movement and to which Christina herself devoted no inconsiderable share of her time and creative energies. And her brother was not the only artist for whom she sat. Her fiancé, James Collinson, a lesser light among the original members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, painted her portrait during their short-lived engage-

ment, and another Brother, William Holman Hunt, adapted her features to somewhat surprising ends in one of his best known works *Light of the World* (1852). Despite posing so frequently, or, more accurately, being posed by a troupe of enthusiastic brush-waving young men between 1847 and 1853, Christina was able to concentrate upon developing her creative power as a poet.

The extent to which Christina Rossetti's early poetry reflects her personal experience remains unclear, but it is impossible to deny that works such as "Repining" (1847) and the lyrics from the prose piece *Maude* (finished 1850) suggest a highly individualized and introspective authorial voice. If, as it seems, the poems of Christina's early maturity offer some sort of verbalized self-perception, whether or not the literary details correspond exactly with the actual or known details of her life, then it is possible to illustrate them with the myriad paintings and drawings in which she is perceived and recorded by her brother and his friends. Such a juxtaposition proves extremely revealing because comparing her portrayal in the major pictures created during the years 1847-53 with certain of the poems she wrote during the same period, supports the contention that there is a relationship between the images of herself reflected, however vaguely, in her poems, and the actual painted images based or projected upon her by the artists among whom she was clearly a desirable and accommodating model.

What follows is by no means an attempt to revive the phrenologist's art. Nor will there be undue reliance upon the techniques and tactics of modern psychoanalysis. A com-