

### THE THIRD ROSSETTI RECONSIDERED

William Michael Rossetti is the central figure in any history of Pre-Raphaelite scholarship: the untiring editor of The Germ, the patient secretary and diarist of the Brotherhood during its brief existence 1849-1853, the jealous guardian of the reputations of his brother and sister in numerous prefaces and introductions to collections of their poems, the cautious editor of a variety of Rossetti letters, diaries and other papers, and the self-effacing author of two volumes called Some Reminiscences (1906).

So far there is agreement about the part played by the "Third Rossetti." But when we get closer to the man and the writer and examine the conflicting verdicts pronounced on him by critics, past and present, the picture becomes more complex. Why has so much scorn been meted out to him? A "bloody fool";<sup>1</sup> a "distressed pedant" producing "barren superfluity" and "harsh implicative cavilling";<sup>2</sup> a "failure as a human being".<sup>3</sup> These are representative thumb-nail portraits. Even a close friend, like William Bell Scott, could lose patience with him for being "indifferent, smiling blandly on a man who insults you and being sharp as green olives to another who holds you dear," although Scott did find him a delightful travel companion on trips to Paris, Venice and Rome, "always ready to give me my way and to oblige and taking a great interest in everything."<sup>4</sup> We may well ask how a dullard can inspire such a range of lively comments. There must have been the challenge of a strong personality for the commentators to become so resourceful. The ingenious metaphors of the invectives reveal a critical commitment that might in itself be considered a compliment. The "baggage mule of Pre-Raphaelite archives," says one amused critic about him, "and it must be admitted that he is not a scintillating writer."<sup>5</sup> That he should be blamed for not being what he never pretended to be, namely an artist and painter and a poet of note, like his brother, is perhaps inevitable. If the Rossettis come in for some debunking he is sure to get the worst of it. "It is easy to see the Pre-Raphaelites and their associates as the Marx brothers of Victorian art," we are told. "In this cast of zanies, William Michael Rossetti naturally assumes the role of Zeppo Marx."<sup>6</sup>

Such quips are symptomatic. With four main exceptions there has been a general unwillingness to assess William Rossetti's writings on their own merits.<sup>7</sup> He is always seen as one of a group. Critics go to great lengths to invent metaphors that can describe what they are pleased to consider his