

## PRE-RAPHAELITE SUICIDES

Ernest Fontana

The representation of suicide in the work of the major Victorian poets assumes the form of monodrama or dramatic monologue.<sup>1</sup> Such a form encourages the rationalization of suicide, since the pre-suicide or post-thwarted suicide speech or monologue provides an explanatory rationale for the anticipated or failed act of self-negation chosen by the speaker. The dramatic monologue enables the poet to counter the impersonated speaker's act of self-negation by asserting the centrality and presence of the suicide's self, of his consciousness and subjectivity in the discourse of the poem. Not only is suicide rationalized within these poems, it is corrected by the self-affirmatory nature of the dramatic monologue. These monologues illustrate Schopenhauer's point that "far from being a denial of the will, suicide is a strong assertion of the will" (2: 514). In this essay, I shall argue that Pre-Raphaelite poets such as Coventry Patmore in "The River," Dante Rossetti in "Down Stream," and James Thomson in "The Room" develop an alternative poetic method to represent suicide, one that corresponds to the work of Pre-Raphaelite painters such as John Everett Millais and Henry Wallis. For these Pre-Raphaelites, the subjectivity and will of the suicide are, in text or image, erased rather than foregrounded.

The self-affirmatory nature of the dramatic monologue/monodrama and its rationalization of suicide is clearly seen in Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852) in which the entire closet drama or monodrama is devoted to the powerful self-consciousness of the protagonist or to what Arnold referred to in his 1853 *Preface* as "a continuous state of mental distress" "unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance" (204). Empedocles seeks to escape from the affliction of thought and consciousness, "the imperious lonely thinking power" (2: 376), by leaping into the volcanic core of Mt. Etna and seeking to thereby achieve union with "the life of life" (2: 357) of the elemental universe (see Pratt's argument). Likewise Tennyson's Lucretius in the eponymous monologue of 1868 seeks escape, not from thought, but from the erotic monomania elicited by his wife Lucilia's love potion: "Why should I, beastlike, as I find myself, / Not manlike end myself?" (ll. 231- 32). And in Tennyson's "Despair" (1881) the speaker and his wife have been driven to