

*Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Selected Poems and Translations*. Edited by Clive Wilmer. Manchester: Carcanet, 1991. 152 pp. ISBN 0-856359-15-7; £ 5.95 (paper).

It is good to have these selections from Rossetti's poetry. Mr. Wilmer has chosen judiciously and his introduction should help assign D.G.R. his rightful place in the tradition of English verse. For a while that place seemed assured—until, roughly, 1910—but then a reaction set in which ended in virtual dethronement. While Rossetti's reputation as a painter has lately soared almost meteorically, his poetic achievement has become increasingly marginalized. The reasons for this decline are many; some of them are set forth by the editor with great acuteness, while others are left unmentioned or touched on far too lightly.

If parody or pastiche is one of the gauges of popularity, it might be instructive to turn for a moment to Swinburne, in many ways Rossetti's close kin and a poet of comparable stature. Swinburne's repetitive music and his employment of conceptual clichés have

made it easy for pasticheurs to "enter in": his fluency and *obvious* idiosyncrasy seem to cry out for imitation. Rossetti, on the other hand, confronts the satirist/copyist with a surface so hard and polished, with solid material so close-grained, that the wedge is bound to split as it tries to enter; and up to a point this holds as well for the average critic and the common reader. Matters are made worse by the fact that Rossetti's poetic gamut is unusually wide, ranging from uproarious wit to utter solemnity; from casual, quotidian themes to themes of high philosophical or theological complexity. His work is characterized by ambiguity and ambivalence—a point repeatedly stressed in the introduction—yet while these are traits that might be expected to lure today's reader they have, oddly, had the opposite effect, acting not as invitation but as deterrent. Rossetti's hesitations and uncertainties are too different from our own; they hark back, by way of Keats, to emblematic Renaissance configurations and, ultimately, to the conceptual dilemmas dear to—even as they plagued—the major exponents of Scholasticism.

Mr. Wilmer dwells (perhaps too exclusively) on the