

"A MOMENT'S MONUMENT":
TIME IN THE HOUSE OF LIFE

Among the Rossetti scholars in recent years who have described The House of Life as a unified poem and who have, with varying degrees of success, tried to explain the nature of its unity are Douglas Robillard and William Fredeman. Robillard asserts that "we can surely see evidence of a carefully planned construction that brings all of the sonnets into a working arrangement with one another and should give us an aesthetically satisfying whole."¹ Yet Robillard fails to state just exactly what the unity of the sequence is, and his dismissal of the additions of the 1881 edition as poems which merely "fill a number of gaps in the cycle"² betrays a marked insensitivity. Far more illuminating is Fredeman's description of the sequence as "a highly, if somewhat artificially, structured poem, worked over a period of over twelve years, but expanded in scope, as is evident in Rossetti's inclusion of both old and new sonnets, to cover the whole of the poet's life."³ Fredeman goes on to call it "an elegaic poem in which Rossetti surveys the crises of his life from youth to death," and to speak of the "retrospective mood of the entire poem."⁴

By calling our attention to such elegaic and retrospective elements, Fredeman helps us to focus upon one of the central unifying factors in The House of Life, the poet's sense of time as an agent of change and his efforts to forestall time's threatening advance. The constant forward push of time weighs heavily on the speaker's consciousness throughout the sequence, as he repeatedly speaks of his sense of loss and his wish to negate time's effects. In a recent study, James Richardson recognizes that Rossetti's "intensity is prolongation, the extension of the moment;"⁵ the individual sonnets are attempts to give moments new life, to make them last -- though changed -- as long as possible. "Silent Noon," sonnet XIX, captures a seemingly perfect moment, as the lovers enjoy a day as "still as the hour-glass." But soon the speaker's awareness of change creeps in, and his description of the hour as "wing'd" indicates the pressure he feels. And in the final line, his switch from the present tense to the past ("When twofold silence was the song of love"⁶) shows the hour dissolving before our eyes. Stephen Spector says of this sonnet: "No matter how sheltered a lover or a poet feels, no matter how much he desires that time stop, the moment must pass, and unobtrusively Rossetti indicates that the moment is indeed doomed to be destroyed."⁷ The moment does pass, and he is left only with his memory of it and with the means of preserving that memory, his poetry; but at least that much does remain. Throughout the sequence, we feel the speaker's sense of loss as we observe him recalling lost moments