

THE CRITIQUE OF THE MIRROR  
IN ROSSETTI'S THE HOUSE OF LIFE

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The House of Life<sup>1</sup> documents a distance between lovers. The poet allows, perhaps encourages an autobiographical reading of this distance. He does speak of a life-long feeling of dissatisfaction which he has experienced from "the disparity of aim and attainment."<sup>2</sup> A series of loved and lost women appear before us in the House, though they are blended and blurred from identity by the unchecked passage of significant detail from one to the other. But the simplifications of autobiography are false to the degree that Rossetti's sonnet-sequence is disturbed by the alterity of the shared world. For another and larger intelligence finds passage through the particulars of Rossetti's life and expression in the public realm.

Transposed out from the enclosures of self (we read in these sonnets of Love, Death, God), the distance of the beloved becomes a first and strange tenet of creation. Desire will not be predicated here, although the sonnets will propose a 'there', to be found after death, where desire may be met. All that would predicate desire is transcendent, occult. The shrine of enddistanced predication is given in "The Blessed Damozel," described there as "occult, withheld, untrod."

The predicators are above the world or hidden from it. The predicating intelligence is sometimes called love, and then enthroned above other enthronements (1), but its last name is God. God is outside the world, preoccupied within his own deity; accordingly, we are left with Lear's flesh, smelling of mortality. In this sense, Rossetti's voice silences the dialogue between God and flesh. He speaks instead an alien word ('God') which has configured itself inside his nomenclature.

The distance of flesh from God is either determining or determined by the distance of poet from beloved. But why this severance between desire and its predicate? Dialogue between God and flesh ceases, for each, in Rossetti's thought, has fallen into interior monologue; they speak to themselves without interruption, repeat their own names in an incessant and monotonous litany. God is God; flesh is irrevocably flesh. So too, the sonnets' lovers love Love, losing themselves in a tautology of desire which desires itself. An enormous and uncrossable vacancy opens between those who love Love. They are the "Severed Selves" (XL) whose souls stand on different shores, each of them "wave-mocked of sundering seas." A spread and darkened distance mocks the proximity of Love's