

ELIZABETH SIDDAL
AND THE
“SOULLESS SELF-REFLECTIONS OF MAN’S SKILL”

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*Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,
But as the meaning of all things that are.*

– Dante Rossetti, *The House of Life* 27.1-2

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first artistic testament to his pupil/lover, Elizabeth Siddal, is *A Parable of Love (Love's Mirror)*. The charming ink drawing (fig. 1) visually dramatizes the poet's infatuation with the student who was to become his wife some ten years later. More specifically, it provides a visual analogue for the opening lines of “The Portrait”:

This is her picture as she was:
It seems a thing to wonder on,
As though mine image in the glass
Should tarry when myself am gone.

The unmistakable hint of narcissism is reinforced by the drawing which reveals that the teacher's interest in guiding his pupil's autobiographical rendering of herself is subordinated to his preoccupation with the mirrored image of himself. “Let all men note,” Rossetti writes in Sonnet 10 of *The House of Life*, “That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!) / They that would look on her must come to me” (10.12-14).

Were one to speculate about what the two ladies on the right side of the drawing might be thinking of the scene, the following line from “The Portrait” would be apt: “My soul another echo there” (45). Whatever artistic medium is employed, Rossetti's informing aesthetic principle is that the artifact “reveals / The Soul – its converse, to what Power 'tis due” (“The Sonnet” 9-10). Artist and subject of art are essentially indistinguishable from each other; each is the