

REVIEWS

The Letters of Christina Rossetti edited by Antony H. Harrison. Vol. 4. 1887-1894. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004. xl, 435 pp. ISBN 0-8139-2295-X. \$70.00.

Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics by Mary Arseneau. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xiv, 227 pp. + 8 b/w illus. ISBN 0-333-68395-1. \$65.00.

Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style by Constance W. Hassett. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005. xiii, 276 pp. ISBN 0-8139-2339-5. \$39.50.

Antony H. Harrison brings his landmark edition of Christina Rossetti's letters to completion with a fourth volume, which covers the last years of her life. These handsomely produced volumes now stand stalwart beside the three of Rossetti's *Complete Poems* (1979-1990), superbly edited by R.W. Crump. A gap yet opens where a multi-volume edition of her Complete Prose should claim that significant space; nevertheless, the amplifying scholarly groundwork devoted in recent years to her writings has made them available for increasingly persuasive study and appreciation, as evident in two new additions to the ever-expanding shelf of Rossetti criticism. Mary Arseneau's *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* and Constance W. Hassett's *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* both make extensive and particular use of the *Letters*, and both supply missing and belated elements in the Rossetti bibliography: a thorough treatment of the Christian configurations and context of her art, and a born-again New Critical reading of her poems. Both are, that is, attractively retrocritical in their approach to Rossetti's work, and thereby feed the desire to understand and recognize it. They are as indispensable as the *Letters* in any attempt to decipher what the signature invariably attached to all her letters and writings (bar those in *The Germ*) comprehends. The neatly inscribed "Christina G. Rossetti" was all that John Ingram, alias Don Felix de Salamanca, needed in *The Philosophy of Handwriting* (1879) to discern that she wrote herself as "essentially feminine" while exhibiting "quite a pre-Raphaelitishness of execution," a scrupulousness discouraging the imagination, and yet sufficient faults, unevenness, and variance in slope to certify her as the genius who wrote "Goblin Market." If Ingram, his analysis informed by set ideas, could trace all this in her autograph, or what Rossetti termed her "fac-simile" (*Letters* 2:68), how much more might the bulking primary and secondary expansions of her name convey, and what challenge pose to categorical ways of reading Rossetti?