

PROBLEMS AND SUCCESSES IN THE MUTUAL DEVELOPMENT
OF D. G. ROSSETTI'S PAINTINGS AND SONNETS

Whether Dante Gabriel Rossetti considered himself more successful as a painter than as a poet seems a moot point of discussion. Yet biographers continue to speculate and even to make undocumented claims about his preference for one medium of expression over the other. In attempting to divorce Rossetti's poetry and painting qualitatively, these biographers often overlook the impact that one expressive form had on the other in their mutual development. Rossetti's fascination with painting and poetry was such that he maintained a prolific output in both media throughout his creative life. His desire to let one aesthetic form inspire the other in his treatment of the same themes clearly demonstrates his interest in relating the two quite intimately.

A latent association between painting and poetry exists in Rossetti's earliest creative works dealing with women. 'The Portrait', 'The Blessed Damozel', 'Ave', 'For an Annunciation', poems written under the general heading "Songs for the Art Catholic", illustrate the interest Rossetti was formulating in the Virgin as a subject for his artistic works. His image of the Virgin was influenced by both poetry and painting before Raphael. The heavenly savior concept of Beatrice in Dante, whose lyric poetry Rossetti had been translating since around 1846, was a determinant in Rossetti's idea of the Virgin. The rich color and detail in paintings of the Virgin by Van Eyck and Memling, whose art Rossetti had seen on his trip to Bruges in 1848, added a necessary visual dimension to this image. While in Bruges, Rossetti wrote of their paintings in his poem 'The Carillon'.¹

'The Girlhood of Mary Virgin' (1849) and its accompanying sonnet² of the same title mark Rossetti's first attempt at a direct analogy between painting and poetry. Here Rossetti's problems in relating the two expressive forms can be clearly focused. In his book, Rossetti and the Fair Lady, David Sonstroem remarks:

Painting his fantasy of salvation had advantages over inscribing it. Chiefly it permitted an easy insistence on the material, human aspects of his Beatrices and Virgin Marys without his having to build these qualities in the incident or assert them in the narration.³

In both the painting and the sonnet Rossetti approached the Virgin with quietude and simplicity, as a human being rather than as an object of worship. In the painting, however, Rossetti could introduce