

ART-CATHOLIC REVISITED: DANTE ROSSETTI'S EARLY PAINTINGS AND NORTHERN RENAISSANCE ART

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti visited Flanders at least twice. The first time was in October 1849 when he went to Paris and Belgium with his friend and PRB-brother William Holman Hunt, and when he faithfully recorded his impressions in a poetic diary. Far less is known about the second visit, in September 1863, in the company of his brother William. But then that second trip lasted only a week and it was, apparently, entirely William's initiative. For Rossetti, the invitation to accompany his brother had come as a brief escape from the drudgery of copying his own paintings for the sake of money. It produced, he wrote afterwards, "very moderate results as regards enjoyment, but still to some benefit in that way as well as in health" (*Correspondence* 3:76). The little we do know about this trip is to be gleaned from his brother's diary, published many years later as part of the *Rossetti Papers*.

My focus here, however, is on Rossetti's first visit to Belgium. I wish to demonstrate the extent to which his early introduction to late-Medieval Flemish art in 1849 was instrumental in the way he thereafter conceived of what one might call his religiously inspired work or what he himself had dubbed the Art-Catholic.

This first trip to Flanders left deep traces on Rossetti's artistic development, not only because he went to Flanders at an impressionable age – he was only 21 at the time – but also because what he found there was the answer to an artistic need, since it brought him in touch with an art which would help him develop what Jerome McGann has called "an intellectual and programmatic basis for practices of the Imagination" (McGann, *The Game* xvi). As several critics have pointed out, there are many interesting influences to be detected in Rossetti's work following upon his first visit to Flanders. Notably George Landow recorded the necessity of a full-length treatment of the Northern Renaissance influence upon Pre-Raphaelite art and literature (*Replete with Meaning*). And although there has not been such a full-length treatment yet,