

REVIEWS

David G. Riede, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Vision. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983. 288 pp. 13 black and white plates. \$25.00

In this ably written, intelligently argued, and scrupulously documented book, Riede pursues a twofold purpose: "First, to combat the legend that Rossetti's imaginative vision was fully realized by the time he was nineteen, and did not significantly change....Second, . . . to refute the idea that Rossetti, as a poet-painter, was able to unify the sister arts, enhancing each with the other . . ." (p. 11). Riede distinguishes between "imaginative vision" and sensibility: "However much Rossetti's outward concerns changed over the course of his poetic career, however much the manifestations of his sensibility changed, his sensibility itself did not" (p. 129). Riede identifies this sensibility as "Rossetti's obsession with surfaces, . . . an obsession with the meaning of life itself. His obsessive use of related imagery corresponds to something fundamental in his way of seeing the world, something fundamental in his sensibility" (p. 161). On p. 181: "Once he rejected his casual aesthetic faith and accepted the implications of his skepticism, he became more and more limited to writing about his own sensibility, and so his poetry became increasingly introspective, even narcissistic."

"The paintings themselves are the primary unmediated vision; they appeal, at their best, to immediate, emotional sensation" (p. 263). And: "Rossetti's aesthetic detachment . . . deliberately forces a disjunction between the emotional content of his poetry and the artifice imposed by the intellect" (p. 273). On the same page:

Rossetti, in fact, was caught between two opposing ways of reconciling soul and body, the Romantic desire for loss of self in otherness, mergence with a universal soul, and the Victorian desire for perfection of the self, usually achieved -- or attempted -- through love. The one way seeks union with an outer soul, the idealized woman as anima; the other seeks a soul within the soul, or epipsyche, sought by Rossetti through introspection and symbolized by the reflecting surface.

For Rossetti, "Speculation begins and ends in the momentary perception" (p. 281). The reader may be uncertain as to what Riede means precisely by his distinction between "anima" and "epipsyche" in the passage cited above, since he had earlier identified them: "First he finds for his soul a female anima, a beloved woman who is his epipsyche" (p. 50);