

THE HOUSE OF LIFE:
A PRE-RAPHAELITE PHILOSOPHY?

Rossetti's poetic magnum opus, The House of Life, has been so often and so variously interpreted by critics that it seems astounding that no-one has dealt with the work as an expression of the quintessential Pre-Raphaelite philosophy. In spite of Rossetti's own words on the sonnet-sequence (namely that it was conceived as "a complete dramatis personae of the soul"¹ and that "the 'life' involved is neither my life nor your life, but life representative, as tripled with love and death"²), as a result of many critics' inability to discern a deliberate structure in the ordering of the individual sonnets, The House of Life has, unfortunately, gained a reputation as a scattered, somewhat incoherent expression of the poet's feelings, reflecting only those feelings at a certain time and not any substantial underthought.

This problem is compounded by many critics' refusal to take as a "manifesto" what Rossetti clearly intended to be such in the first issue of The Germ. Here, for example, is Martin Meisel's extended lament:

It is hard to believe that any program for the revolution of an art ever began with more internal contradictions, ideological and temperamental, than the program of the Pre-Raphaelites. Fortunately none of the initial group was a genuine ideologue, and (at least in the first blossoming of the movement) all in the major triad. Millais, Holman Hunt, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, wished to accommodate their contrarities to a community of thought and practice. Without a program, there would have been no revolution. How remarkable then, by the standards of self-conscious avant-gardism as we know them, that their short-lived journal, The Germ, offers so little in the way of a manifesto. Historians have generally had to settle for little more than the sentence that begins the third paragraph of the initial advertisement: "The endeavour held in view throughout the writings on Art will be to encourage and enforce an entire adherence to the simplicity of nature; and also to direct attention, as an auxiliary medium, to the comparatively few works which Art has yet produced in this spirit." But adherence to Nature, even to its simplicity, was altogether too safe a critical commonplace to serve as a revolutionary program. Where was the necessary specification and elucidation?³