

“TILL I AM A GHOST”: DANTE ROSSETTI  
AND THE POETIC SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

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*But then why be the polisher of poems for which a ghost, and not even your own ghost,  
is alone responsible?*

– Dante Rossetti, “William Blake” 593

Despite his well-deserved reputation for standing aloof from the bustle of his times, Dante Gabriel Rossetti kept watchful attendance upon the ways in which poets “incarnate” the tastes and temperaments of their readers.<sup>1</sup> Reviewing Thomas Gordon Hake’s *Madeline, with Other Poems and Parables* (1871) in *The Academy*, Rossetti observed that

above all ideal personalities with which the poet must learn to identify himself, there is one supremely real which is the most imperative of all; namely, that of his reader. And the practical watchfulness needed for such assimilation is as much a gift and instinct as is the creative grasp of alien character. It is a spiritual contact, hardly conscious yet ever renewed, and which must be a part of the very act of production. (“*Madeline*” 105)

The mediumistic cast of Rossetti’s imagination is suggestive. Cecil Lang once noted how the keynote of otherworldly, occult “strangeness” inherent in all of Rossetti’s poetry and painting might be termed “oneirocritical” (xxiii), and Lang’s observation seems equally true for Rossetti’s conception of the poet’s telepathic “grasp” of his percipient readers. Rossetti’s emphasis upon how a poet achieves his success only by making “spiritual contact” with the “alien character” of his readers – the majority of whom will always and necessarily be, for the writer’s long-term success, “ideal,” spectral, unseen, and unborn – is as revealing of Rossetti’s personal preoccupation with posthumous states and occult procedures as it is evocative of certain larger, distinctively Victorian doubts and misgivings.<sup>2</sup>

Rossetti was ever a temporizer when it came to defining posthumous survival in any precise or dogmatic fashion, and this reluctance to commit himself to any fixed position on things supernatural played a key role in heightening his interest in achieving a secular immortality by building up a