

“THE PERIL OF PLEASURE UNAVOIDABLE”:
ROSSETTI
AND THE VERBAL INCARNATION OF THE VISUAL

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Commenting on Dante Rossetti's 1868 exhibition, Algernon Swinburne observed of the artist's works that they are “fit raiment for the idea incarnate of faultless fleshy beauty and peril of pleasure unavoidable” (15:212). Swinburne's statement reminds us of the controversy inspired by Robert Buchanan's criticism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's fleshy school of art and, more importantly, of the complex nature of Rossetti's attempts in poetry and painting to juxtapose the verbal and the visual in his canon. The flesh incarnates ideas; it renders effable the ineffable.¹ The resultant pleasure of verbal incarnations of the intangible and unspeakable, however, is threatened by the attendant peril unavoidably present when the artist clothes in flesh the spiritual. For in that moment, as Swinburne points out, “the struggle of the image to keep afloat in the mighty sea of words” commences (*Letters* 6:139).

The seemingly conflicting metaphors Swinburne employs to describe the relationship in Rossetti's work between word and image is instructive of the complex nature of the artist as verbal incarnator of image. The clothes analogy suggests the pleasure resulting from rendering in a visually pleasing way what is otherwise unamenable to the senses. The idea of art as incarnation suggests, as we will see, the ‘otherness’ of offspring produced by the artist's efforts. And the notion of artistic image or idea struggling amid the poet's verbal incarnations indicates the peril attendant upon the artist's efforts.

Swinburne, like Shelley before him, was mindful of Medusa's significance as indicative of the artist's predicament: both hope and fear attend the attempt at rendering verbally the mute image informing art. “’Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown / Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,” Shelley explains (“On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” 14-15). The artistic enterprise yields a narcissistic reflection that comes to be viewed as inimical to the viewer who