

A MOMENT'S MONUMENT:
TEMPORAL REVISION AND THE SONNET FORM OF
D.G. ROSSETTI

Jennifer A. Wagner

Richard L. Stein has remarked that the Petrarchan sonnet form works with remarkable appropriateness for [D.G. Rossetti's] interests," and that "the form implies a world in which the contradictions of his art are accepted and reconciled" (791). Stein's initial observation is valuable; the Petrarchan form's asymmetrical 8-6 structure, a built-in but imbalanced binarism, is well suited to explore the deep conflicts in Rossetti's art between the sensuous and the ideal, the visual and the visionary. Where that "reconciliation" actually takes place in Rossetti's sonnets is, however, unclear to me. For Rossetti's sonnets succeed *not* in their achievement of imaginative vision, but rather in their expression of a perceived imaginative failure. The "contradictions of his art" are significantly *not* reconciled; rather, Rossetti uses the binarism of the Petrarchan sonnet to thematize *failure* and belatedness, an absence of resolution. What emerges forcefully in his sonnets is a revisionary procedure that highlights an absolute disjunction between the experiential moment and the aesthetic moment – and between those and the occasion of writing the poem.

For Rossetti that occasion is not so much a visionary as a revisionary moment, a "re-seeing" of experience, and even of his own habitual aestheticization of those experiences. This is both an aesthetic and a temporal matter; my notion of this problematic aligns with Robert Langbaum's description of the century's schism between art and nature, and with his so-called "doctrine of experience" – that "imaginative apprehension gained through immediate experience is primary and certain, whereas the analytic reflection that follows is secondary and problematic" (35). That re-visionary moment of "analytic reflection" is at odds in Rossetti with the visionary moment that the sonnet form itself successfully tropes in the poetry of Wordsworth, for example, whose rediscovery of a visionary mode of sonnet had so profoundly altered the "function" of this form by lifting its "vision of a voice," as Geoffrey Hartman might call it (292), from the private and sentimental to the public and prophetic.

It is a critical commonplace to speak of "intensity" in the poetry of Dante Rossetti, and to relate it to Pater's "profoundly significant and animated instants"