

William Michael Rossetti and *The Germ*

Most knowledge of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood available to the literary historian comes through the pen of William Michael Rossetti. His role as secretary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and his later career as critic and editor made him the natural source for first-hand information. However, Rossetti's honesty, earnestness, and matter-of-fact writing style have made him appear to be a nearly invisible witness to Pre-Raphaelitism. Such an honest and conscientious witness presents few grounds for disbelief. Literary historians use his accounts as if he were an objective, camera-like recorder of events. This treatment denies his humanity. He had his own point of view of the people and events connected with the Movement. In addition, his writings are subject to the distortions of time. He continued to write until his death in 1919 at the age of 89; therefore, some of the material he gives us was written fifty or more years after the event. For both of these reasons, the accuracy and the emphasis of William Michael Rossetti's writings about the P.R.B. need to be examined before they are accepted as the total truth about Pre-Raphaelitism.

Since Rossetti's connection with the Pre-Raphaelites began at the founding of the group, we can start our examination of his accounts with an episode in early P.R.B. history. In January 1850, the first issue of a new magazine called *The Germ* made its appearance. Through this magazine the young artists of the P.R.B. hoped to disseminate their philosophy of art and to provide an organ for art as well as poetry, created in sympathy with this philosophy. The major events surrounding the creation of *The Germ* have been amply chronicled by Rossetti in his writings. His most coherent report is to be found in the "Introduction" written for the 1901 facsimile edition of *The Germ*. A comparison of this "Introduction" with Rossetti's other accounts and with the writings of other Pre-Raphaelites reveals the extent to which Rossetti's writings present an inter-

pretation rather than a factual catalogue of events.

The first concrete actions towards establishing a magazine were begun after the 1849 Academy Exhibition. That summer, D. G. Rossetti proposed the publication of a new type of journal. W. M. Rossetti described its goals in *Some Reminiscences*:

The Germ aimed to be the exponent of the Pre-Raphaelite principle of strict naturalism—the treating of a subject in all its details in exact conformity with the rationale of that particular subject, and this excluding (in literature) exalted descriptive matter from any speech which professed to be a speech uttered in ordinary life.¹

At a meeting in August of that year, the seven Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti, Thomas Woolner, William Holman Hunt, John Millais, F. G. Stephens, and William Collinson, and a few like-minded friends decided to begin the project. At first, they planned to call their magazine *Monthly Thoughts in Literature, Poetry, and Art* and to have a sonnet on the wrapper. The original plan had been that each of those at the meeting would write a sonnet, and the most suitable one would be used. William Rossetti immediately set to work, finishing his poem on August 19th. No one else even bothered to write a sonnet, so, by default, William's poem was given the lead position.

The 1901 "Introduction" suggests that D. G. Rossetti more or less pushed his friends into this venture. The other members of the P.R.B. are characterized as "not one of them having any spare cash, and not all of them much steadiness of interest in the scheme set going by Dante Gabriel Rossetti."² In his 1895 commentary on his brother's family letters, Rossetti vividly notes this resistance:

I feel pretty sure that at first every one of