

The Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti, ed. Roger W. Peattie. Pennsylvania State UP, 1990. Pp. xxxiv + 728. \$49.50. ISBN 0-271-00678-1.

It is hard not to feel instantly sympathetic towards William Michael Rossetti, a middle child of an immigrant family sandwiched between clever siblings. Nowadays there might be theories about the role he took on, the burden of being always reliable and always responsible, a foil to the exotic nature of other members of his family and the facilitator of both their folly and their fame. One thinks of other men left to clear up the mess their more celebrated brothers created around them, always available with financial and emotional support. Theo and Vincent Van Gogh come particularly to mind.

In this carefully edited scholarly edition of the letters of the other Rossetti, a wealth of information is made available that will enhance and clarify our understanding of the second half of the nineteenth century. The index is something of a *tour de force*. It is precisely the attention to duty and the organization of William Michael's life that made his letters so interesting. Employed throughout his life by the Inland Revenue, he nonetheless pursued a literary calling, reviewing the poetry of Arnold and writing major critical studies of Swinburne (1866), Walt Whitman (1868), and Shelley (1870). He was largely responsible for introducing Whitman to English audiences. Later in life he devoted himself to writing about his own family and to collecting and editing their papers—a task which must have seemed at times almost overwhelming.

The importance of Blake to the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti has always been recognized. What is interesting in these letters is to find that importance endorsed by a steady sequence of purchases, loans, and encounters: William Michael lending the Blake notebooks and *Songs of Innocence* in 1850, discussing with Swinburne the *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in 1874, and anticipating the Blake exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1876. His evaluations of art were eclectic and not always predictable; he told Swinburne on 15 June 1871 of a "choice and capital little Hogarth" he had managed to buy at Christie's, and, trying to convey to William Bell Scott the appearance of Whistler's work, he spoke on 14 May 1860 of "a rough but magnificent piece of Reynoldsish-French color."

William Michael Rossetti was a Republican by political sympathy, his allegiance was with the commune, and he made a point of not christening his children. But the limitations of radicalism in a man of his class and education in this period are also all too apparent. He was deeply suspicious of *Aurora Leigh* whilst being unable to stop reading it: "I am still reading it. It is a most wonderful thing. One scarcely knows at what point to stop one's enthusiasm, the wealth of poetic thought and sympathy is magnificent, and yet one feels that there is a certain excess in it" (17 February 1857). He repeated the charge of excess on at least one further occasion.

William Michael was the organizing member of the Rossetti household. If his business-like ways permitted a certain liberality to other members of the family, his role as caretaker also seems to have extended into the realm of physical health. Surrounded by sickness, he carried the burden of health. His mother's state of health and Christina's delicate constitution were matters of particular attention. Christina's mastectomy in 1892 was performed (unlike Fanny Burney's a century earlier) with ether as an anaesthetic, and her brother's assiduous concern was charted in precise detail. His instincts were those of the chronicler, but his interest in Dante Gabriel verged on the obsessive. For example, when Frank Hueffer—the brother-in-law of William Michael's wife—died in 1889 leaving a widow and children in an impecunious state, William Michael Rossetti organized the funeral, arranged telegraphs and, amid all the chaos, still found time to remark that the undertaker, curiously, had some knowledge of Gabriel (22 Jan. 1889).

Running through these letters is the almost always silent voice of Lucy, Ford Madox Brown's daughter by his first marriage, whom William Michael Rossetti married in 1874. She was an artist in her own right, exhibiting (one of the useful footnotes tells us) at the Dudley Gallery from 1868. It is sad to see her described by the editor as an "abrasive personality" when we know so little about her and when her side of her story within this difficult family cannot be consulted. William Michael continued to write to her affectionately enough after she had retreated to Italy to nurse her tuberculosis-damaged health. But remarks like "I will of course read the beginning of your book when it reaches me, and have not the slightest intention of being 'discouraging'" (20 November 1893) make one wonder how she felt about her life, her failing health