

ERASING THE ART-CATHOLIC:
ROSSETTI'S POEMS, 1870

Critics of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry have customarily divided his work into three distinct classes, the early poems, often described as Pre-Raphaelite or "Art-Catholic" poetry, the poems of the middle period, usually seen as intensely personal love poetry, and the late poems, mostly ballads. The divisions are reasonable enough, but have led to innumerable errors about Rossetti's development, since critics who have commented on the early work have almost invariably used the versions of early poems that appeared in Rossetti's first published collection in 1870. Yet these poems were so substantially and significantly revised for publication that the final versions belong more to the middle period than the early. Supposedly chronological studies of Rossetti's career frequently attribute poems like "The Blessed Damozel," "The Card Dealer," and "The Portrait" to the late 1840's without, apparently, realizing that lines cited as written in, say, 1847, were not in fact written until 1869. "The Portrait," for example, a radically transformed version of a poem written in 1846 or 1847 clearly belongs, formally and thematically, to the year 1869, yet the best of the "chronological" studies of Rossetti transform his entire career by placing it in 1847.¹ Three major errors result from this sort of haphazard dating. First, it encourages the impression, fostered by Rossetti, that he emerged full-blown as a precocious master in 1847, and so reinforces the idea that he did not develop as a poet. Second, it leads, obviously, to a serious misinterpretation of his early career. And finally, it promotes a false estimation of the nature of the 1870 volume by undervaluing the great labor Rossetti exerted to achieve a uniform level of craftsmanship and a consistent thematic outlook. He conscientiously labored to make Poems, in his own words, "studied work, where unity is specially kept in view."² The ways in which Rossetti revised the early poems for 1870, and the way in which he carefully arranged the sequence of poems to achieve a unified volume reveals clearly the shape of his career, and the considerable achievement of his Poems of 1870.

The most important of Rossetti's revisions were designed to eliminate any impression of religious faith in his book. Rossetti probably never had any genuine religious faith, but his early poems were sufficiently imbued with borrowings from Dante and the stilnovisti that in 1847 he was able to gather them together and send them to William Bell Scott under the general title Songs of the Art-Catholic. Scott, who later came to realize that Rossetti "had never thought of pietistic matters except as a sentiment,"³ observed that by 1853 even the sentiment was no longer part of Rossetti's inspiration, that by this time "the spirit that had made him choose 'Songs of the Art-