

MICHELANGELO'S SWEETNESS, COLERIDGE'S  
FLYCATCHERS, LIGEIA'S EYES, AND THE FAILURE OF  
ART IN  
*THE HOUSE OF LIFE*

Joseph H. Gardner

Like many Victorian texts, *The House of Life* is best seen as a response to Carlisle's injunction that the work lying before modern man is the forging of a "new myths" to replace the tattered garments of old belief. Or, put in different way, the sequence begins where Arnold's career as a poet ends. Arnold had accepted Schiller's dictum that all art is dedicated to joy--joy being for Arnold the result of wholeness and harmony, a threefold unity of the self with itself, with the external world, and, ultimately with God. Unable to experience that unity on any of its levels, Arnold simply gave up the attempt at a poetry whose validity, he felt, could come only through its expression. *The House of Life* is the record of a similar attempt to recapture a lost world of joy, an attempt that ends in tragic failure. The speaker in the poem seeks to achieve Pater's ideal of "breadth," "centrality," "unity. . . in blitheness and repose" (182) only to experience a sense of psychic isolation and fragmentation equalled only in the so-called "terrible" sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Part I of *The House of Life* records the speaker's attempt to achieve unity and joy through an elaborately constructed religion of sexual love, a "new mythus" that collapses in Sonnet 48 with the discovery that love is not the principle of life but rather the handmaiden of death. The speaker then transfers his hopes and allegiances to art, which he characterizes as "Love's Last Gift." But art fails Rossetti's protagonist as radically and as disastrously as had love. The reasons for this failure are contained in those sonnets generally accepted as constituting Rossetti's *ars poetica*: the introductory sonnet on "The Sonnet" and Sonnets 60-63.

Of these five sonnets, all but one--the last in the final ordering of the sequence, number 63, "Inclusiveness," were written after 1871.<sup>1</sup> That is, they were all composed after Pater's essay on "The Poetry of Michangelo" had first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* (November 1871) and probably after its reappearance in *The Renaissance* (1873). Rossetti's enthusiasm for Pater's writings can be well documented; he was particularly drawn to this essay on a body of poetry he himself considered translating (*Letters*, II: 765; III: 1119-22).