

D.G. ROSSETTI'S TRANSFIGURED LIFE:
"WITH COMPASSED MYSTERIES MUSICAL"

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*Because those pretious mysteryes that dwell,
In musick's ravish't soule hee dare not tell,
But whisper to the world ...*

– Richard Crashaw, "Musicks Duell"

For ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound I speak—
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.

– Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven"

Dante Gabriel Rossetti is at once deeply personal and, through his symbolic methods, *praeter-personal* – habitually impelled to move beyond individuality, and beyond individual experience, into a realm of Symbolism where subjectivities may coalesce. This latter impulsion, both a principle and a recurring theme, is a consequence of the former, personal aspect of his work. In his poetry, the tension is frequently felt between solipsism and the desire to break out of the bounds of individual subjectivity. What I am about to consider are some of the ways in which Rossetti's art may be understood as a transfiguration, or mythologization, of the artist's real experience in the physical world, with his symbolism not only emerging from a refraction of experience, but constituting a means of artistic communication that lays open subjective space for readers and viewers. Real women, actors in Rossetti's real worldly experience, are mythologized; they are defamiliarized so as to become archetypal, even as their images become ever more distinctive; and they are made to bear indefinite and subjective symbolic potential. In this light, and with some help from Walter Pater, I will attempt to characterize Rossettian symbolism, and look again at Rossetti's work through the lens of