

REVIEWS

Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost by Jerome McGann. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. xviii, 188 pp. + 18 colour, 19 black-and-white illus. ISBN 0-300-08023-9. \$30.00.

As we might expect from the editor of the Rossetti Archive, this book is visually as well as verbally arresting. The print is elegant and the wealth of illustrations are almost all taken from contemporary Victorian engravings and photographs, documenting and making available versions of Rossetti's paintings that are not easily accessible. Even more significantly, the book claims a status for Dante Gabriel as "an epitome of the last fifty years of the nineteenth century. It supports this claim by deliberately addressing the wrongs done to Rossetti's work in the subsequent judgments of Modernism, which rejected his work, particularly his painting, as lacking in intelligence or theoretical rigor on the one hand and in technical skill on the other, and as flaunting a strange combination of vague symbolism and sensual surfaces. McGann also offers Rossetti's work as an answer to Plato's question about whether art can provide truth functions, whether there can be an intellectually satisfactory relationship between beauty and knowledge. This answer is couched by Rossetti in terms appropriate to artists rather than philosophers, in forbidden poetical and graphic forms, where the divisions between intellect and sensation dissolve, and where articulation is offered in modes other than verbal abstractions. A sustaining motif is Rossetti's ability "to carry out an argument with images and purely pictorial materials." Truth for Dante Gabriel is not therefore a matter of extractable concepts or ironic distance, but of commitment to practice, of constructing a field of action that draws in the reader-observer, and where "draws" is always already a pun that signifies the inseparability of observer, artist, and mediating mode in the dynamic process that constitutes cultural reality. Thoroughly researched, always immersed in pictorial and textual detail, intellectually provocative, and continually relating Rossetti's work to broadly-based aesthetic debate, McGann's book is an entirely significant moment for Rossetti studies.

While he makes repeated use of Rossetti's own, neglected, phrases – the "inner standing-point" of art, "fundamental brainwork," and "Venus surrounded by mirrors" – McGann also returns to Walter Pater's three main points about Rossetti's work: chronic self-consciousness, ambiguous imagery, and mythopoetic method (an idealist treatment of common things). McGann