

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S "AVE" RECONSTRUED

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Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.
– Luke 2.19

The Virgin Mary is a prominent but not continuous presence in the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Between 1847 and his death in 1882 he produced well over a dozen pictorial and literary pieces in which she appears as a central or significant figure, most of them clustered in and around two periods: the period of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848-53), when he painted *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848-49) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849-50), and the period of the second group of Pre-Raphaelites (1856-59), when he painted such works as the *The Annunciation* (1855), *Mary Nazarene* (1857), *The Passover in the Holy Family: Gathering the Bitter Herbs* (1856-57), and *Mary in the House of St. John* (1859). Since all four of the paintings of the later period correspond to portions of "Ave," the likelihood is strong that the poem – his most substantial literary treatment of the Virgin – was worked up from an earlier Marian poem, "Mater Pulchrae Delectionis" (1847), in the late 1850s and then revised in 1869 for publication in *Poems* (1870); however, if "Ave" was conceived, as Rossetti claimed, as "a prologue to a series of designs" (qtd in *Works* 661), then at least some composition may have begun in the summer of 1849 when he was planning a triptych consisting of "the eating of the passover by the Holy Family" flanked by "the Virgin planting a lily and a rose, and the Virgin in St. John's house after the crucifixion, as illustrating the periods of her life before the birth and after the death of Christ" (W.M. Rossetti, *PRB Journal* 13), a structure that, as will be seen, manifests itself sequentially in "Ave," a poem that benefits greatly from being read in relation to its corresponding Marian pictures and in the context of his epistemic and increasingly eschatological concerns in the years following its publication.

"Ave" consists of seven verse paragraphs of uneven length divided by content into five verse paragraphs of meditation on the Virgin's life from the