

The Pre-Raphaelites

Florence S. Boos

This year's review of Pre-Raphaelite criticism begins with Anthony Harrison's *Victorian Poets and Romantic Poets: Intertextuality and Ideology*, a broadly based study which considers the relationship between Victorian poets and their Romantic predecessors, and includes chapters on Swinburne, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (together in one chapter), Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and William Morris. In the introduction, entitled "Intertextuality, Ideology, and the New Historicism," Harrison discusses the applicability of such terms to Victorian poetic issues at some length; outlines several aspects of Jauss's reception theory (which directs attention to the shifting "horizon[s] of expectations" of works, and their situation in "literary series" in which authors respond to their predecessors); and cites other, more recent injunctions to explore literary works within their own "cultural systems," consider complexities of authors' relationships to their precursors, and disregard narrow distinctions of genre. Few literary historians are unaware of the merits of such hermeneutical consciousness-raising, but its basic tenets bear restatement and reconsideration; they also apply to the study of poetry as well as fiction and drama, the genres of most recent new-historical choice.

Harrison's chapter on "Dante Rossetti: Parody and Ideology" considers a familiar but persistent problem: How are we to assess the nuances and admixtures of self-conscious irony and sentiment in Rossetti's works? In Harrison's words, "The more often we read certain poems by Rossetti, the more puzzling, uncertain, and ambiguous their tone, their purpose, and of course, therefore, their meaning seems to become." In effect, Rossetti is a deconstructionist's dream, an observation earlier critics have already expressed in other terms; Harrison's mode of re-inscribing this is to argue that Rossetti "appears virtually to embrace intertextuality as a coherent and self-sufficient ideology." Rossetti was certainly one of the most self-conscious poets of the period in his use of predecessors' work, and Harrison's awareness of this provides a basis for his study of "The Burden of Nineveh," "The Blessed Damozel," and other poems in the light of Rossetti's Dantean and Romantic predecessors. Less plausibly, Harrison claims that "issues of aesthetics [in Rossetti's work] . . . fully displace and supersede matters of substance." (*Fully* displace?) His readings of concluding stanzas of "The Blessed Damozel" and "The Burden of Nineveh," moreover, suppress some obvious counter-interpretations. Of "The Burden," for example,

Harrison argues that "Rossetti's 'Nineveh' . . . becomes a weight of critical and self-critical meaning that elides traditional ideologies; it is also a refrain, as an inevitable and recontextualized reenactment of historically layered creative moments and *their* patterns of meaning. This poem tells us not only of the burdens of the past as they are appropriated by the present but of the fact that all parodies as artistic reenactments are burdensome: weighted with critical commentary on all historical eras, all relevant works of art, all ideologies of all writers and readers, including the present ones." Perhaps, but Rossetti seems to take clear aim in this poem at some "historical eras" more than others. Most of Rossetti's attempts at direct social criticism were admittedly slight, but he clearly constructed the mocking interpellation of Ninevan arrogance in this poem to discredit one very familiar and pervasive "present ideology," and Harrison simply sidesteps the Ruskinian censure of the familiar final stanza, "Was this thy God,—Thine also, mighty Nineveh?"

Working within the constraints of current critical language, Harrison also applies the word "parody" so broadly that it becomes effectively synonymous with "extended series of conscious allusions." On this gloss, *Paradise Lost* is a parody of *The Aeneid*; one might consider recuperating the word for other uses—comic inversion, say, or deliberate mockery. Finally, Harrison scrupulously reviews the literary criticism of the past decade, but slights or ignores earlier Rossetti criticism, which often undertook counterparts of the intertextual studies he reworks and extends. Artlessly called "source" studies, these critical works also explored significant contrasts and affinities of the sort which inform Harrison's "intertextuality," and it would seem appropriate to acknowledge them, if only as a meta-level commentary on past "cultural systems." Harrison is not the first, for example, to note Rossetti's deep fascination with refashioning the language of the Romantics.

Harrison's comparative chapter, "In the Shadow of E. B. B.: Christina Rossetti and Ideological Estrangement," is fairer to Elizabeth Barrett Browning than the briefer and more dismissive allusions in his book *Christina Rossetti* (discussed below). Here, Harrison skillfully characterizes Rossetti's work, then demonstrates her qualified esteem for the achievements of her famous contemporary (whose values and methods she nevertheless chose to reject). Comparisons of Rossetti's "Eve" with Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* then lead him to consider "maternal" ideologies which he finds in Victorian women's poetry. In my view, Harrison slights the more egalitarian impulses in *Aurora Leigh*, but his portmanteau discussion of the two poets offers many useful insights.

Also interesting is "Art is Enough: Morris, Keats, and Pre-Raphaelite Amatory Ideologies," which compares *Love Is Enough* with Keats's "Endymion" and Morris' later narrative poem *The Pilgrims of Hope*. Most

commentators have contrasted *Love Is Enough* with *Sigurd the Volsung*, or the latter with *Pilgrims*, but Harrison correctly observes that *Love Is Enough* “argues that the dream of love is an authentic and attainable reality, indeed the only one that offers true fulfillment in life, [and] . . . this ideology dominates *The Pilgrims of Hope* as well as *Love Is Enough*.” Less convincing to me are his assertions that *Love Is Enough* “may now be seen as a defiant rejection of all varieties of political activism” (against the background of the fall of the Paris Commune in 1871), and that the lovers Azalais and Pharamond “secure a place in the House of Earthly Bliss” (The two lovers are in fact separated at poem’s end). Morris was clearly aware that “Endymion” and Rossetti’s sonnets were partial antecedents for *Love Is Enough*, but Harrison’s claim that Morris appropriated from Keats’s early work an “amatory [and by extension, apolitical] ideology” ignores other “intertexts”—Biblical ones, for example, in the long echo of the Last Supper—which expressed and also anticipated the view of “love” in the masque as a self-sacrificial regulative ideal. Harrison also sees little direct connection between this ideal (or “amatory ideology”) and the socialist ethic of *The Pilgrims of Hope*, and views the latter instead as a return to the political implications of Keats’s early poetry: “Morris’ conservative reaction against the amatory and political ideologies of his fellow Pre-Raphaelite poets in 1871 thus turns out as well to be an unwitting subversion of the political gestures inscribed by the precursor whose supposed counterideology he was attempting to subsume within his own poem. Eventually, however, Morris did assimilate the full political as well as the amatory ideology of the early Keats, who—in his faith that love ‘might bless / The world with benefits unknowingly’—is born again in 1885 as a pilgrim of hope.”

Harrison has also published a second recent book, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (1988), an extended discussion of Rossetti’s work. He begins with the premise that “much of Rossetti’s poetry . . . abjures both didacticism and sincerity, actively resisting autobiographical readings”; it alludes instead to “the created artifact itself, rather than to any external reality or extrinsic concerns.” Guided by this view, Harrison considers several aspects of Rossetti’s aesthetic practice, including her linguistic concision, prosodic innovation, and attention to Tractarian ideals, and argues that her writings anticipated more secular forms of renunciation and transcendence in the works of fin-de-siècle poets.

Harrison also cites the strong manuscript evidence offered by Rebecca Crump’s recent scholarly edition of Christina Rossetti’s poems in refutation of William Michael Rossetti’s claim that she wrote spontaneously and revised little, and considers as striking examples of such revisions two vastly different versions of “Maude Clare.” More speculatively, he conjectures that these changes reveal Christina Rossetti’s “central concern with artistic

efficacy," and derives from his analysis of them further corroboration of his formal and anti-psychological readings. More eclectic readers might wonder about the transference in the final version of narrative sympathy from Lord Thomas' jilted but handsome lover to his homelier but unloved wife, or query whether Rossetti undertook analogous plot reformulations in other published works as well. Harrison's zeal to read Rossetti as a rigorously "detached" poet seems to parallel other critics' efforts to reinterpret other nineteenth-century poets—Dickinson, Swinburne, Tennyson, Morris—as ironic artificers, rather than expressive but sentimental poetic naïfs. One response to this is to point out that conscious poetic artistry hardly precludes complex interrelations between the artists' psychological personae and their elaborate breeds of literary allusions, framing indirections, and narrative identities.

In the end, at any rate, Harrison seems less interested in Christina Rossetti's revisions than in her place among her predecessors, contemporaries, and successors—her standing, in effect, in a slightly enlarged canon. In chapters entitled "The Poetics of 'Conciseness,'" "With Heavenly Art': Pre-Raphaelitism, Aestheticism, and Rossetti's Devotionalist Ideology," and "Aestheticism and the Thematics of Renunciation" Harrison discusses unifying features of her poetic and religious sensibility, and offers what amounts to an extended apologia for her mode of composition; "The Poetics of 'Conciseness'" provides careful close readings of several poems, among them "Songs in a Cornfield" and "An Old World Thicket," and a final chapter, entitled "Intertextuality: Dante, Petrarch, and Christina Rossetti" argues that Rossetti's many allusions to the Petrarchan tradition in "Monna Innominata" witness her fidelity to classical sources for her own poetic practice.

Harrison's distaste for social-psychological readings (his generically dismissive term for which is "biographical") also leads him to bracket or ignore several aspects of Christina Rossetti's work which have interested feminist critics. Ironically, this omission may be one of the book's oblique merits. As if to compensate for her long categorization as a WOMAN poet, in effect, Harrison explores the ways in which Christina Rossetti's works may reasonably be read as responses to Plato, Augustine, Petrarch, Dante, Newman, Keble, (male) Pre-Raphaelites, Swinburne, et al. This is well worth doing, so long as one does not simply ignore the repressive sexual-political dogmas which were also implicated in her work's self-abnegation, distaste for sexual experience, and intricately self-reflexive melancholia—heightened versions, after all, of attitudes which were enjoined upon many other conscientious and religiously inclined Victorian women. Despite Harrison's claim that Rossetti subordinated love and religion to a self-sufficient aesthetic imperative, his extended interpretations of Rossetti's

achievements also seem at times to reflect a strong measure of straightforward empathy with the religious presuppositions of her work.

An alternative but equally "historicist" approach to Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* appears in Rod Edmond's lively *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative* (1988). Edmond first assesses several recent studies of the Victorian family, then offers a thesis that the best long narrative poems of the period "are not perfectly crafted self-referring verbal icons but large, loose, open, and various works. A similarly open and various critical language is necessary to discuss them." Edmond also finds these non-icons innovative rather than conservative in nature, as well as "experimental in form, in language, and in subject. They are in tension with the dominant values of their age. And in the case of *Aurora Leigh* and *Goblin Market* they are at the head of an alternative tradition of women's writing, only now being properly recognized, which connects them with some of the most interesting developments in late-twentieth-century writing." In a chapter entitled, "Who needs men? Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*," Edmond considers Christina Rossetti's adolescent illness, representations of illness in the novels of Austen, Brontë, and Collins, and Victorian ideologies of marriage and sexuality as background contexts both for *Goblin Market* and for Rossetti's early prose tale *Maud*. Though *Goblin Market*'s sisters do marry in the end, I believe Edmond captures the poem's essential ethos in his conclusion that "the allegory is clear but heterodox. . . . Unlike most nineteenth-century texts, recovery from illness is associated with the rejection rather than the requital of heterosexual love. There has been a radical reordering of the usual male-female resolution."

Diane D'Amico's article "Christina Rossetti's 'From Sunset to Star Rise': A New Reading" (*VP* 27:95-100) outlines a revision of standard critical assumptions that the poem refers to a "fallen" woman. Christina's manuscript allusion to the "House of Charity" refers to a shelter for the poor, D'Amico believes, not a house for reclaimed prostitutes, and the speaker in the poem is a casual sinner, who may yet awaken to await Christ's Second Coming. David Nolte's "Whispering Likenesses: Images of Christina Rossetti, 1847-1853" (*JPRS* II, no. 1), contrasts two portraits of Christina Rossetti by Dante Rossetti and James Collinson, and argues that her sonnet pair "The Portrait" "can be seen as an idealized and prophetic self-portrait—it is her poetic equivalent of Dante Gabriel's intended pictorial tribute to the Virgin."

Two recent books include considerations of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry, from very different points of view. In *Style and Self in Tennyson, D. G. Rossetti, Swinburne, and Yeats*, James Richardson aims to explore a range of psychological nuances, and he explains his intentions as follows:

The psychological biases under consideration are less ideas than feelings, less feelings, even, than ways or forms or styles of feeling. They are so universal in the nineteenth century that they may not seem to call for comment, but for all their vagueness, and perhaps because of it, they are deep, powerful, resistant to change—and an essential stratum of the experience of Victorian poetry.

Richardson's elegant characterizations of the intricacies of Rossetti's language and "psychological biases," appropriately resonate with the very effects they describe:

In Rossetti, polysyllabic roll is a form of poetic touch, of attention, and it parallels his complicated word order in effect: things interweave but do not quite disappear. . . . He exploits sound not for nonsense but for two senses at once, even to the point of creating subliminal oxymorons in which the suggested meaning unsays the explicit. . . . Rossetti's fondness for dim and elaborately composed spaces suggests that agoraphobia is his aesthetic, if not his disease.

Richardson's more detailed discussions of Rossetti's heightened and self-conscious language in *The House of Life* also provide valuable insights into the psychological effects of Rossetti's intricate and often highly original modes of composition.

In "Typologies of Defloration," a chapter of *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art*, Adrienne Munich claims that the poetry and artworks of a group she calls "the Aesthetes" (e.g., D. G. Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones) exploit a "typology [which] permits [them] to explore new territories, . . . question a sexual topic that had previously been considered sacrosanct, and . . . disguise their concerns about their own questioning." Her own interpretations of the Andromeda legend as "a story of crossing, even transgressing, a cultural boundary," lead her to claim that "the trinity of monster, man, and woman is so fractured that the myth expresses the fears, errors, and desires lurking behind the archetypal Victorian image of rescuing knight and bound, virtuous lady," and the accompanying prints (of paintings by Ingres, Rossetti, and Burne-Jones) illustrate quite vividly the "typologies" she describes. With a good deal of skill, Munich manages to maintain a precarious balance of sarcasm and empathy with the anxious but stereotypically "heroic" male protagonists.

We close this year's review with four recent articles on the writings of William Morris, all from the *Journal of the William Morris Society*. David and Sheila Latham, first, provide their usual concise and helpful annotations of a wide range of recent Morris criticism in "William Morris: An Annotated Bibliography 1986-87"; the three other articles consider aspects of Morris' later work.


In "The Role of Grimhild in *Sigurd the Volsung*," Jane Ennis argues that Morris enhanced the structural coherence of his adaptation of the *Volsunga Saga* when he strengthened the role of the evil witch Grimhild; she further suggests that "[i]n Morris's poem, the downfall of the Niblungs could be interpreted as the tragedy of Grimhild, as all her scheming for

the sake of her family leads to their destruction, not to the greater glory she desired for them."

In "'Whilom, as tells the tale': The Language of the Prose Romances," Norman Talbot offers a close reading of the communal and historical implications of Morris' language in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, and concludes that "the style's positive intentions and effects are also obvious: we experience a delightful and total immersion in a language not our own, and are challenged to understand a world view irredeemably more fearful than our own."

In "Louise Michel and William Morris," the late Linda Richardson contrasts Morris' account of his socialist heroine with the more resolute and assertive activities of the historical Michel, an acquaintance of Morris who had served during the Paris Commune as "an ambulance woman, but . . . certainly not the model for Morris' ambulance-woman. . . . Michel was a force to be reckoned with. She was in charge of recruiting women to serve in the ambulance corps, and welcomed all women, especially the prostitutes who were ostracized by the male officials of the Commune." The model of Michel was not totally lost, however, for "Morris's women warriors in his two historical romances of the late 1880s, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, owe a great deal, I suspect, to Louise Michel. These warriors are unlike the women in any of his other writings. They are determined, courageous, ruthless when forced to fight."

It is a great sadness to all who knew her that lymphatic cancer has silenced Linda Richardson's critical feminist voice. She has left behind *Morris and Women*, a major manuscript-study which I hope to review when it appears in print.

This year's Pre-Raphaelite review seems to continue a noticeable shift in recent work toward (re)consideration of historically relevant sexual-political issues, and reexamination of some implications of what is now called "gender analysis" for Pre-Raphaelite studies. This shift of focus is appropriate, and it seems likely to persist in the immediate future. 

Swinburne

Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV

Current Swinburne studies look back and forward. Some catch-up is essential because illness prevented Robert A. Greenberg from preparing