

The Pre-Raphaelites

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1994 was a modest *annus mirabilis* for the study of Pre-Raphaelite poetry. Jan Marsh's *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* may well be the most informative account of its elusive subject ever written, and Antony Harrison's centenary double issue of *Victorian Poetry* devoted to Christina Rossetti provides a wide collection of recent criticism on the poet's writings. Fiona MacCarthy's comprehensive overview of Morris' life in *William Morris: A Biography* gives careful attention to areas ignored or oversimplified by previous biographers, and Pamela Bracken Wiens's edition of *The Tables Turned* makes newly accessible Morris' engaging but little-known socialist parody.

Among many other things, Jan Marsh's 634-page *Christina Rossetti* is richly illustrated, offering an informative array of less well-known illustrations to supplement D. G. Rossetti's well-known portraits of his mother and sister, among them a graceful 1847 drawing by her father of the adolescent Christina in ringlets, and her own pencil sketches of fox, squirrels, and wombat, showing wit and a measure of artistic talent. Also interesting are the photographs and drawings of relatives, friends, and objects of romantic attachment—the placid form and countenance of Charles Bagot Cayley, for example, her “dearest friend” and sometime suitor; and the plump, middle-aged Maria Rossetti, apparently cheerful and contented in the habit of the All Saints Sisterhood.

Marsh is also the first critical biographer to provide an extended account of Rossetti's work and activities in their Victorian social and literary milieu. She carefully details the backgrounds of hundreds of Rossetti's associates, artists, and literary acquaintances, and examines her subject's opinions against the background of Puseyite religious teachings, the course of the Crimean War, and the evolution of the mid- and late-Victorian women's movement.

The result is thoroughly instructive, for Rossetti's cautious and qualified opinions evolved over the years in somewhat unpredictable directions. A vigorous campaigner to raise the age of consent for women (above the then-current level of thirteen), for example, and the advocate of an independent teaching voice for women in the Church of England, Rossetti also volunteered her name for a petition in opposition to women's suffrage. An ardent antivivisectionist who condemned British imperialism and class inequality, she eventually

decided that social philanthropy outside the bounds of religious teaching was evil.

Marsh follows the eddies, up- and down-drafts of Rossetti's thought from adolescence to death, notes many subtle shifts, and contrasts her views with those of friends and reformers. She examines with special care Rossetti's painfully ambivalent responses to demands for gender-equity, and makes a sustained effort to fathom Rossetti's sense of sin, adolescent breakdown, periodic depressions, and recurrent nightmare-fantasies in which monsters and repellent male figures threatened to engulf her. Christina was ordered at age fourteen to care for her partly blind and helpless father, and her poems of adolescence and early adulthood throbbled with a sense of betrayal ("deceived, / By the friend we love the best"), blighted youth, obsessive guilts, and desires for death.

Several reviewers have rejected Marsh's conjecture that Christina felt wounded by some of her father's behaviors (presumably erotic or at least physical advances), but her hypothesis seems to me a valuable attempt to explain certain puzzling aspects of Rossetti's life and character. Marsh also remarks on Rossetti's lifelong pattern of concern for the fates of sexually threatened adolescent girls—shown in her support for the campaign to raise the age of legal consent, mentioned above, and her preoccupation, in *Goblin Market* and poems on seduced or "fallen" women, with situations similar to those she encountered in her volunteer work at Highgate Penitentiary.

Finally, Marsh puts to rest speculations about a romantic attraction to her lifelong friend William Bell Scott, and provides for the first time a full and convincing account of Rossetti's affairs of the heart. Christina Rossetti may not have had a very strong wish to marry, in the end, but Marsh's discoveries clarify a number of allusions and emotions that thread through her poetry.

Christina mourned for many years her broken engagement with James Collinson, for example, and reacted with pain to chance meetings with him, his later marriage to an older woman (the proximal occasion, Marsh points out, for Rossetti's uncharacteristically acerbic "Maud Clare" poems), and his subsequent death at fifty-four. Marsh has also uncovered the fact that Rossetti hoped at one point for a proposal from the painter John Brett, and provides a detailed account of Rossetti's relationship with Charles Cayley, the scholarly friend with whom Rossetti exchanged love poetry over the course of several years. Cayley visited her regularly until his death, and bequeathed to her a ring, his writing desk (which contained packets of their letters), and his other literary remains.

The greatest distinction of Jan Marsh's literary biography, however, may be her excellent treatment of the poems themselves—a rare quality in literary biography, and especially valuable in the case of a poet whose verses have often been dismissed as repetitious, melancholy, and simplistic. Marsh considers Rossetti against a rich background of her female poetic predecessors, contemporaries, and successors—among them Landon, Parkes, Gemmer, Proctor, Ingelow, Barrett Browning, Webster, Dickinson, Paitt, Tynan, Meynell, Wilson—and carefully notes a number of traces and resemblances in their work. She cites dozens of little-known Rossetti poems, and argues persuasively for their exact imagery, plangent and varied rhythms, emotional depth, and stringent honesty in the representation of mental states.

Especially dramatic is Marsh's examination of *Goblin Market* in the light of Christina's experiences at Highgate Penitentiary. The latter contained an apple orchard, whose fruits could only be plucked on pain of expulsion, and its director apparently retailed the story of an inmate's Laura-like exorcism of the sin of apple-eating, possible sources of puzzling aspects of the poem's plot.

Marsh also provides valuable insights into other Rossetti poems: *The Prince's Progress*, the nightmare- and monster-poems, verses on the Indian Mutiny and other publicly reported events, and her many poetic attempts to probe the losses and contentments of middle age. The biographical contexts Marsh provides for hundreds of poems—from Rossetti's girlhood to the year of her death—clarify their interpretation, and confirm Marsh's claim that her poetry was "of greater range and depth than has commonly been thought."

Marsh has even had the patience to extract the literary and biographical ore from Rossetti's often-ignored later devotional writings, such as *Seek and Find*, *Letter and Spirit*, *The Face of the Deep*, *Called to Be Saints*, and *Time Flies*. Marsh defends these works' aesthetic merits and compares their motifs and images with counterparts in Rossetti's more secular writings.

Finally, Rossetti's journalism provides one sharp facet of carefully individuated eccentricity. In an entry on Petrarch Rossetti prepared for the 1857 *Imperial Dictionary of Universal Biography*, she inserted a claim that Laura was "in fact my own ancestress, as family documents prove." This apparently unverifiable assertion obviously foreshadowed the poem's claim, in the preface to *Monna Innominata*, that the poet's sorrows in love equipped her to speak in Laura's voice.

Marsh's eloquent biography, in short, will have a clarifying effect on future criticism of Christina Rossetti's work. Her exhaustive

research undermines many simplistic generalizations about Rossetti's life and opinions, encourages new exploration of less familiar recesses of Rossetti's verse, and reinforces Marsh's claim in the book's final paragraph, that "the combination of emotional pain and literary talent gave her life and work in unique quality."

Some of Marsh's preoccupations are echoed in A. H. Harrison's admirable collection for *Victorian Poetry* (32, nos. 3-4) of eleven essays on the writings of Christina Rossetti. Harrison's introduction remarks on the sea-changes that have occurred in Rossetti criticism over the past twenty years, and points to a need for further studies of her devotional writings, Blakean lyrics, and extensive manuscript revisions.

Two of the volume's essays find in Rossetti's poetry pointedly dissenting responses to the views of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In "Restoring the Book: The Typological Hermeneutics of Christina Rossetti and the PRB," Linda H. Peterson notes that Dante's painting of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* changed the traditional artistic motif in which St. Anne taught the young Mary to read, to one in which she taught her to copy an embroidery design. Peterson contrasts Rossetti's work with the typological art of her nineteenth-century predecessors, and argues that *Goblin Market* and *The Prince's Progress* evoke an alternative tradition in which women "read the scriptures and finding relevant types in them, repeat biblical patterns in their own lives." In Peterson's reading, the repeated misjudgments by the hero of *The Prince's Progress* may also have recorded Rossetti's critique of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's early use of biblical typology and her brother's inadequate vision of the spiritual possibilities inherent in nature. Peterson calls attention to the significance of the poem's final female chorus, in which "a community of women interpret—that is, re-envision, renarrate, and represent—events that men have instigated and participated in, but that they have finally failed to comprehend" (p. 223).

In "Pilgrimage and Postponement: Christina Rossetti's *The Prince's Progress*," Mary Arsenau reads the poem's allegory in the context of Christina's letters to her brother. In the latter, Rossetti defends her word choices for the poem and criticizes Dante's dilatory approach to the major issues of his life. "In *The Prince's Progress*," Arsenau concludes, "I believe Christina addresses the tragic consequences that lay in store for the individual who does not look through objects and events in search of a stable moral and spiritual significance, and in her expression of these veiled concerns she foresees with uncanny accuracy the kind of poetry that her brother would publish in

Poems (1870)" (p. 294). Like Peterson, Arseneau also remarks on the contrast between the poem's authorial judgments and those of its protagonist: "The lesson that the Prince does not learn is one that Rossetti's readers must" (p. 295).

In "Christina Rossetti's Vocation: The Importance of *Goblin Market*," Jan Marsh provides a concise account of the genesis of Rossetti's enigmatic poem, written during a period in which Rossetti feared she might never attain the literary vocation she desired. Marsh also adduces significant parallels between Rossetti's poem and Anna Bray's *Traditions, Legends, Superstitions and Sketches of Devonshire* (1838) and Archibald MacClaren's *The Fairy Family* (1857), and suggests that Rossetti's dedication of *Goblin Market* to her sister Maria reflects sisterly conversations about career-choices and poetic technique, rather than gratitude for preservation from some unnamed sexual sin. In her conclusion, Marsh observes that the poem ironically created the situation it celebrated: "To the extent that Highgate Penitentiary prompted *Goblin Market*, therefore, it can be said to have aided her accession to literary success, and thereby opened a new and rewarding phase in her poetic career" (p. 246).

In "Christina Rossetti's Copy of C. B. Cayley's *Divine Comedy*," Kamilla Denman and Sarah Smith gather what is known of the poet's literary and personal relationship with Charles Cayley, and demonstrate how carefully Christina sought to preserve her friend's literary memory. In her role as literary executor, for example, she wrote careful annotations and corrections into her copy of his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, in the apparent hope that a revised edition might eventually appear. Denham and Smith discern Cayley's thanks for Christina's early interest in his endeavors in his prefatory poem to *Purgatory*, addressed to "Blumine" in the early 1850s, to which she replied in "'Blumine' risponde," an Italian poem of 1867.

In "Modern Markets for *Goblin Market*," Lorraine Janzen Kooistra shifts attention from the poem to its reception. The article's interesting plates of the poem's Victorian, early- and late-twentieth-century illustrations (by D. G. Rossetti, Laurence Housman, Arthur Rackham, Kinuko Craft, and John Bolton) confirm her view that the poem's interpretations have ranged from Freudian rebuke to voyeurist celebration. Kooistra also notes certain ironies. The plates, she adduces, show that the poem has always been popular outside the academy, but its twentieth-century audiences imposed simplistic notions about the topics a Victorian spinster might have addressed, and recast the poem as a children's tale. Men, in some cases antifeminist ones, have also provided all the illustrations of female vulnerability, abandonment,

and self-defense that Kooistra reviews. Illustrations of its central scenes by women will presumably grace some future edition of Rossetti's poem.

Two articles examine little-considered aspects of Rossetti's later work. In "Abstruse the problems!': Unity and Divisions in Christina Rossetti's *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets*," Linda E. Marshall provides close readings of the verbal nuances of Rossetti's elaborately crafted double sonnet sequence, and identifies recurrent themes of unity and division which Rossetti blended in the final sonnet's carefully patterned echoes of earlier rhymes and motifs. In "A View from 'The Lowest Place': Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose," Colleen Hobbs interprets *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti's eschatological commentary on Revelation, as a protofeminist critique of theological gender-norms. Hobbs aligns Rossetti with the tradition of female medieval mystics who contemplated union with Christ as bridegroom in Heaven, but finds in her work a "subversive" vision of the spiritual realm, in which the Bride reigns equally with her bridegroom, and new values prevail: "[*The Face of the Deep*] also addresses the worldly order and the reordering of it that is to precede the Christian Apocalypse. With different degrees of reticence, she describes the hegemony of her world and then offers a strategy to survive, to subvert, and ultimately even to triumph in a system that denigrates the powerless" (p. 411).

Three articles in the volume consider intertextual questions about mutual influence. In "Sisters in Art: Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning," Marjorie Stone examines three poems—"Three Nuns," "L.E.L.," and "The Lowest Room"—in which Stone finds implied references to lines from E.B.B. Rossetti consciously resisted elements of Barrett Browning's style, belief-system, and choice of subject matter, but spoke of her in later life with a certain disinterested warmth. Stone considers E.B.B.'s influence on Rossetti part of a "larger pattern of historical elision, in so far that Barrett Browning's influence on the Pre-Raphaelite poets in general—on their ballad writing and on their medieval iconography, for example—still remains largely unexplored" (p. 359). She also warns us (and, presumably, herself) not to contrast the two poets to the detriment of one, so that "one sister is always constructed as more pleasing than the other."

In "Poet's Right': Christina Rossetti as Anti-Muse and the Legacy of the 'Poetess,'" Susan Conley argues that Michael Field's sonnet "To Christina Rossetti" manifests Cooper and Bradley's hostility to the forms of renunciation practiced by their distinguished fe-

male poetic predecessor. Noting that the sonnet "offers a prescription for reading Rossetti's work which presages its declining reputation in the decades to come," Conley claims that the two authors' use of value-laden allusions from classical mythology is inconsistent with their claims to reject a male poetic tradition. Conley also notes the advantages of poetic restraint and rejection of excess, and cites in Rossetti's defense her declared intentions in the preface to *Monna Innominata* and nineteenth-century expectations that the woman poet should be an *improvisatrice*.

"'Poet's Right' " makes good points, but the author's zeal to defend Rossetti may slight the obvious point of Field's sonnet: that their predecessor might in fact have written better love poetry—or equally good poetry of another kind—had she experienced sensuous love, as they have done ("breathed joy in earth and in thy kind"). Rossetti, after all, had made the opposite claim: that the author of *Monna Innominata* might be a better poet than Elizabeth Barrett Browning because she had been frustrated in love.

In "Saintly Singer or Tanagra Figurine? Christina Rossetti Through the Eyes of Katharine Tynan and Sara Teasdale," Diane D'Amico examines two other poetic responses to Rossetti's work. Katherine Tynan, also a religious poet, valued highly her friendship with Rossetti and showed clear Rossettian influences in her early work, but turned later to un-Rossettian celebrations of marriage and motherhood. D'Amico concludes that Tynan's mature poetry "can be read as a response to the melancholy she hears in her predecessor's voice, a response that does not attempt to compete with or supplant the songs of 'Santa Christina' but merely offers a different melody" (p. 394). The poems of the American Sara Teasdale also exhibited lifelong parallels with Rossetti's work, as D'Amico observes, and Teasdale's praiseful commentaries on Rossetti's life and poetry manifested a clear sense of human and artistic kinship: "[Rossetti's] life, one of the most perfect examples in literature of intensity in reticence, consistent, delicately, and consciously molded as a Tanagra figurine, kept its inner quiet inviolate until the end" (p. 402).

In her conclusion, D'Amico remarks that "despite such differing perspectives, both Tynan and Teasdale established in their imagination a very personal relationship with their Victorian foremother, one that had more the qualities of friendship than of rivalry," and observes that "the extent of Rossetti's importance to these two very different women poets strongly suggests that her life and work had an influence on a broad range of successors" (p. 402).

A revenant Christina Rossetti, returned to earth a century after

her death, might be bemused as well as quietly gratified to witness her sympathetic feminist "recuperation." New undertows will eventually sweep the critical shore, of course, and bring with them new modulations and modifications in critical tastes. One or more of Rossetti's friends, sisters, and rivals—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, perhaps, or Michael Field, or others now less prominent—may then elicit equally thoughtful and historically informed readings in their turn(s).

An attentive reader, in any event, may have noticed that this excellent volume—edited by a man—contains the essays of eleven female critics. It is to be hoped that other male critics will make new contributions to the exegesis of this and other significant women poets. Now that the works of nineteenth-century women poets have finally begun to evoke the critical attention they always deserved, it seems to me the more important that critics of both sexes explore the range of poetic sensibilities in women and men alike.

The complexities of William Morris' life and achievements have inspired several searching and informative biographies over the years, as well as valuable introductory accounts of his life. Notable examples of the former would include J. W. Mackail's *The Life of William Morris* (1899), of course—a virtual primary source—and E. P. Thompson's impassioned political biography, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955; new edition 1976). Three briefer accounts have also appeared in recent decades: Philip Henderson's *William Morris: His Life, Work, and Friends* (1967), Jack Lindsay's *William Morris* (1975), and Peter Stansky's *William Morris* (1983). In addition, valuable insights into Morris' economic circumstances and the day-to-day operations of the Firm can be gleaned from Charles Harvey and Jon Press's careful study, *William Morris, Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (1991; reviewed here in 1993).

At 780 pages, Fiona MacCarthy's *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* is the most comprehensive biography of Morris to appear in decades. It is copiously illustrated, well-researched, and laden with "strong" interpretations, and its appearance a year before the centenary of Morris' death is well-timed. A new generation of readers will benefit greatly from MacCarthy's study of Morris' network of family, friends, and associates, his commercial decisions, and his innovative work in the decorative arts.

MacCarthy provides useful new insights, for example, into the effects on Morris of his father's death and his schooling at Marlborough; his reactions to the factory system as he observed it in Leek; the manifold influences of his experiences in Iceland on his late prose romances; the details of his early activities on behalf of the

Eastern Question Association; the effects of Jenny's epilepsy on his evolving social views and commitments; and the characters and eventual fates of other members of his original extended family. She also canvasses the ample evidence that Morris was an affectionate friend, husband, and father, and provides a measured account of the complex relationship of Jane and William Morris. She does not overinterpret his friendships with Georgiana Burne-Jones and other women, and she conveys well Morris' unusual capacity to rise to the stresses of his life. At one point, for example, Morris offered to help nurse his wife's erstwhile lover Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and MacCarthy notes, "This was the self-effacement that gained the Holy Graal" (p. 321).

Finally, MacCarthy also provides a persuasive account of Morris' work for the Socialist League, and describes in detail the public hostility he encountered and his efforts to bridge the intricate tensions between the League's divergent social-democratic, anarchist, and anarchocommunist factions.

In this massive work, I noticed some peripheral errors of fact. Harriet Taylor, not her daughter Helen, was John Stuart Mill's collaborator on *The Subjection of Women*; and May Morris might well have sought to have an affair with her epistolary friend John Quinn, but the evidence suggests that it never happened. The style of MacCarthy's tour de force is also rather digressive, and she sometimes bases conclusions on data reasonable readers might consider arbitrary or irrelevant—when she adduces a graphologist's interpretation of Morris' handwriting, for example, in the middle of one of her discussions of Morris' character (p. 269). MacCarthy also "knows" why the Morrises' marriage was unhappy ("One senses an emotional aridity, with Morris as the classic stumbling English husband," p. 221); that Rosalind Howard served as "procuress" in introducing Jane Morris to Wilfred Scawen Blunt (p. 449); and that May's annual placing of a wreath on her father's grave showed her to be "even more than ever fixated on her father" (p. 677). Such dramatic and declarative pronouncements sustain interest, but they sometimes blur the line between fact and authorial suggestion.

At times MacCarthy also seems to damn Morris when he did, and then again when he didn't. His rejection of the class-bound values of his father, for example, bespoke "cruelty" (p. 20), and his opposition to G. B. Street's mode of church restoration was a quarrelsome attack on a former mentor ("It was Morris who had quarrelled and who went on hounding Street in the years to come with a curious, ungenerous compulsiveness," p. 108). Yet she also finds it puzzling that the socialist Morris functioned as a dutiful member of assorted social groups—

in particular, his extended family ("He was still attached to the clamjamfry of the Morrises with a despairing tangle of emotional ties," p. 437).

MacCarthy's most serious reproach, in this generally praiseful book, is that Morris and Co. was a more-or-less benignly run model business, not a socialist workplace. It employed young boys to sew embroideries (p. 454), and much of its wage-labor was repetitive. This observation is not new, but it remains appropriate. Morris himself admitted that there was nothing radically socialist about the Firm's wage-structure, and he was aware that he and other "enlightened" capitalists still extracted profit from the labor of their workers. Indeed, he tried to incorporate this admission into his rejection of social-democratic gradualism ("makeshift").

In the end, what was most distinctive about Morris was not that he "overcame" or renounced his privileged origins, for he clearly did not (even Kelmscott Manor, after all, is a rather tasteful and modest manor). What was remarkable was that he summoned the resources of mind and character—the political "negative capability"—to participate fully in his circumscribed world, yet imagine and struggle to make it otherwise.

MacCarthy shares most late-twentieth-century readers' preferences for Morris' early poetry and later prose romances, and does not explore a number of potential analogues between Morris' life and writings: "I would not press the claims of Morris's own favourite *Sigurd the Volsung*; it is too large, too chant-like. Volsungs are out of fashion. . . . But there is much to reward the modern reader in Morris' early poems, *The Defence of Guenevere*, short, spare, edgy narratives of violence and loss. And most of all his 1890s' novels repay reading. . . . These are fantasy stories, early science fiction, written in a curiously archaic language. . . . They are as modernist as Morris ever comes" (pp. ix, x). Despite her limited appreciation for his later poetry, however, her descriptions can be eloquent. Of *The Earthly Paradise*, for example, she remarks in passing that "there is a kind of timelessness in Morris's poetry, a sense of being nowhere and yet somewhere drenched with meaning" (p. 259). Even the "chant-like" *Sigurd* "rises like a Nordic cathedral, a strong and simple edifice of anapaestic couplets in four colossal books" (p. 304).

MacCarthy also takes her subtitle, *A Life for Our Time*, seriously, and attempts at several points to engage the issues that preoccupied her subject, and discern how a hypothetically reborn Morris might have judged political events a hundred years after his death. Some of her choices resonate more persuasively than others. Not all will agree,

for example, that "we can feel quite certain that the world collapse of Marxism would have overjoyed him" (p. xix). Nor will they see in some entries on MacCarthy's list of late-twentieth-century first-world "Electronic addiction? . . . Inner city planning? . . . Political correctness? . . . Time-share homes? . . . Spaghetti junctions? . . . Craft Fayres? . . . Executive phones? . . . Corporate sponsorship? . . . Market-orientated society? . . ." (p. xix).

It may not really be possible to guess the counterfactual political and artistic reactions of a thinker as varied, unpredictable, and radical as the one MacCarthy describes. But Morris might be more deeply preoccupied, I think, with other fault-lines and political mendacities in the economic order: our unacknowledged cruelties and indifference to human suffering, or the subornment and corruption of political dissent, and of Morris' beloved "popular culture."

In any case, few human beings will ever accomplish enough to have their lives rewritten by successive biographers in subsequent generations. Another writer might have dwelt on Morris' intellectual coherence and literary work at greater length, but Fiona MacCarthy's elegant biography conveys more than any since Mackail's the range and depth of character which underlay Morris' radically innovative aims. All who consider Morris' writings in the next generation will therefore turn to MacCarthy's work for a wealth of relevant details and contexts which will help them understand his background, purposes, and achievements. In that sense, she may indeed have written "a life for our time."

The last publication under review is a new edition of a little-known Morris dramatic interlude, *The Tables Turned; or, Nupkins Awakened*, edited by Pamela Bracken Wiens, and published in an attractive illustrated format by Ohio University Press. Wiens's thoughtful introduction notes the play's indebtedness to medieval morality plays and Victorian melodramas, its historical embeddedness in confrontations between the Socialist League and the police, and its favorable contemporary reception by Yeats, Shaw, and others. *The Tables Turned* is surprisingly undated, and the reappearance of Morris' unique blend of drawing-room farce and pointed social indictment suggests that the dramatic features of his writings could bear closer examination.

As I remarked at the beginning of this review, the "year's work" has been unusually substantial, and it seems reasonable to hope that Pre-Raphaelite writers will sustain the interest of the next critical generation. More immediately, the likely emergence of a new biography of Dante Rossetti (planned by Jan Marsh), the imminence of

Jerome McGann's hypertext edition of Dante G. Rossetti's paintings and poems, the publication of the final volume of Norman Kelvin's edition of Morris' letters, and the planned appearance of several centenary volumes devoted to Morris' life and works promise good things for the Pre-Raphaelite fin de millénium.

Algernon Charles Swinburne

MARGOT K. LOUIS

In last year's review, with truly prophetic insight, I described Peter Anderson's article, "The Sterile Star of Venus: Swinburne's Dream of Flight" (VN 84 [Fall 1993]: 18-24) as "usefully provocative." The piece has in fact sparked a controversy within the pages of VN which has raised valuable questions about Swinburne criticism; and this is a boon to the reviewer, for otherwise this has been a very quiet year in Swinburne studies. Further, although this controversy may seem like a mere side-eddy in the grand slow tidal fluctuations of critical fashion, it provides *in parvo* an excellent example of the cross-currents within contemporary academe.

Is Swinburne a poet concerned exclusively with language itself—and if so, is this to his credit or not? Or does his poetry, on the contrary, refer to and engage with a world beyond texts? In Rikky Rooksby's "Swinburne's Internal Center: Reply to an Article" (VN 87 [Spring 1995]: 25-29) and Anderson's riposte, "Tristram, Iseult and the Internalized Center: A Note on Rikky Rooksby's 'New' Swinburne" (VN 87 [1995]: 29-33), we have a continuation of the quarrel which has simmered within Swinburne studies through most of the century—following on Eliot's description of Swinburne as a poet who provides only "the hallucination of meaning" (*The Sacred Wood*, 1920)—intersecting with the quarrel over poststructuralist theory which has provided entertainment (and sometimes tenure) to scholars for the last quarter of a century. For poststructuralists ask a further question: can language ever refer to a world outside itself? Have we, in effect, access to anything but texts, fictions, structures of signifiers? If the answer to these two questions is "no," then a Swinburne whose language is consciously and deliberately nonreferential is an honest, brilliantly avant-garde poet whose proto-deconstructionist tendencies are to be celebrated; if the answer, on the other hand, is "yes" (or even "sort of"), then the ghost of Eliot remains to be laid.