

# Selected Poems and Translations

**Dante Gabriel Rossetti**

Edited with an Introduction by Clive  
Wilmer



Fyfield Books

## SELECTED POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI (1828-1892) was a central figure in nineteenth-century art circles. He was a painter himself and in 1848 co-founded the influential Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His collection of translations, *The Early Italian Poets*, appeared in 1861; his *Poems and Ballads and Sonnets* were published in 1881.

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*Roam on! The light we sought is shining still.  
Dost thou ask proof? Our tree yet crowns the hill,  
Our Scholar travels yet the loved hill-side*

from 'Thyrsis'

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

*Selected Poems and Translations*

Edited with an introduction by  
CLIVE WILMER

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## Introduction

For many of his contemporaries, Dante Gabriel Rossetti was a heroic figure. That is not, I suppose, how he is thought of today. Few of the great Victorians have fared well in the twentieth century, but Rossetti's stock has fallen more than most and, though in the past twenty years or so his pictures have to some extent recovered, his verse has not even been in print for most of that period.

But in the later nineteenth century, a succession of artistic groupings looked to Rossetti as their leader. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of 1848, founded by Rossetti with Holman Hunt and Millais, was the paradigm for subsequent rebellions. It was, in many ways, the first of the modern movements in the arts. For one thing, the Pre-Raphaelites defied the establishment of their day, presuming to follow aesthetic standards endorsed by neither academy nor market. For another, the art they aspired to emulate – that of medieval Italy – was generally thought of as primitive. They were also suspected of unorthodox political views: the realism with which they handled their Christian subjects smacked of socialism to some critics. The original Brotherhood turned out to be short-lived, but Rossetti's Pre-Raphaelite charisma was to affect artistic life in England for more than three generations – from Morris and Burne-Jones in the following decade, through Pater and the Aesthetes, to Yeats and the young Ezra Pound at the start of the present century. For all of them, Rossetti represented an ideal: that of solitary dedication to art and beauty, sometimes against the odds. He was no polemicist and lacked the public courage of Wilde or Ruskin. His strength lay in his indifference to reverence and success. The mere existence of his work implied a criticism of the age for its ugliness, philistine materialism and brutality. It is a strange irony that, without Rossetti, the Modernists who dethroned him would have lacked a great example.

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti was born in London in 1828. He was the second of four children, all of whom had literary aspirations.

It was an extraordinary family. The mother, born Frances Mary Lavinia Polidori, was half-Italian and bilingual, though her upbringing and education had been English. A devout Anglican with a strong feeling for literature, she brought her children up to be English like herself, in spite of the fact that they were three-quarters Italian. (Dante Gabriel never visited Italy, in spite of the obvious motives for doing so.) The father, Gabriele Rossetti, was an enthusiast for Italian liberty whose political activities in the Kingdom of Naples had forced him into exile. He was attracted to religions of a vaguely mystical nature and had progressed through free-thinking and Freemasonry to a pot-pourri of his own, oriental and Swedenborgian in tendency. It is worth remarking that while Dante Gabriel's taste for Catholic symbolism was clearly learnt from his mother, he was his father's son in the 'mild but muddled awe' – the phrase is from Evelyn Waugh's biography – with which he confronted the great issues of life. His sister Christina, whose poetry is rich with the spirit of her mother's Anglicanism, was in this respect better served.

Gabriele Rossetti was also an authority on Dante and wrote four books about him. He seems to have read the *Comedy* in quest of ciphers that – so he argued – disclosed the poet's 'secret' political and religious beliefs, which of course foreshadowed his own. The children grew up in an atmosphere steeped in Dante and political rumour, with their home a talking-shop for exiled Italian patriots. Dante Gabriel absorbed the poetry but, though he sympathized with his father's radicalism, made it a principle to preserve his art from all systematic belief.

Frances Rossetti had been brought up an Evangelical but was stirred in adulthood by the Oxford Movement. In this she resembled many of her contemporaries, who thus unconsciously combined Catholic forms with Protestant idealism. It is a combination to be found in her son's earliest paintings and in his verse apology for them, 'Old and New Art'. In 1846, very much in that frame of mind, he enrolled in the Antique School of the Royal Academy. Always impatient with external disciplines, he soon tired of drawing from antique casts. Before long he had left the school and was sitting at the feet of the 27-year-old Ford Madox Brown. Brown had the mixture of spiritual idealism and boisterous

earthiness that always attracted Rossetti. His pictures, with their sharpness of outline and unshaded brilliance of colour, appealed to a young man bored with the dingy chiaroscuro of English academic classicism. Brown had been taught by the German Nazarenes in Rome to value medieval and early Renaissance painters, whose art was then looked upon as 'primitive'. The richly coloured world of such pictures, with their Catholic imagery, enchanted Rossetti and blended in his mind with the Romantic fashion for the Middle Ages, to which Anglo-Catholic ritual in part belonged. It is hardly surprising that he soon encountered other young painters subject to the same trends and, drawn like his father to conspiratorial atmospheres, founded with them (half in jest) a secret Brotherhood, whose aim was to subvert the Academy.

As it turned out, Rossetti had little in common with Holman Hunt and less with Millais, but the effects of their boyish rebellion were considerable. The Brotherhood had been formed in 1848, the year of revolutions. At the Academy exhibition of 1849, the unexplained initials P.R.B. on their paintings caused the critics to over-react absurdly. Their reviews attracted the attention of John Ruskin, already the most influential critic of the day, who, when he saw the paintings, recognized many of his own values in them. In two letters to the *Times* he sprang to their defence and, in effect, made their names for them.

Their brief moment of brotherly success ensured that a most peculiar hotch-potch of preoccupations would for later generations seem a coherent programme: naturalism in painting, the Italian 'primitives', Gothic architecture, Anglo-Catholic symbolism, ethical socialism, the Arthurian myth, Dante and Chaucer, anti-materialism, anti-industrialism, the social value of beauty, and so on. To all this Rossetti added two personal convictions. He believed – no doubt following Coleridge – that creativity is a fundamental part of human nature and that, given favourable circumstances, we can all acquire the necessary techniques to flesh out our visions. Secondly, he took it for granted that all art, literature and design have the same roots and belong in community with one another. Thus one of the earliest Pre-Raphaelite enterprises was the short-lived magazine

*The Germ* (1850), which published poetry, prose and drawings by the Brothers and their associates. The first issue included, *inter alia*, 'The Blessed Damozel' and Christina Rossetti's 'A Pause of Thought'. At the same time, Rossetti was writing poems as 'captions' for his own paintings and sonnets on other pictures he admired. This community of the arts was to be resumed with increased vitality in 1857 when he came into contact with two young disciples studying at Oxford, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Through these new friendships, and particularly through the multi-talented energies of Morris, Pre-Raphaelite ideals were to outlast the century. It can be argued indeed that they have not been absent from our own; one thinks of the Vorticists and their journal *Blast*, the Ditchling community of Eric Gill and – on the debit side – the sickly nostalgia of the Ruralist Brotherhood.

It was in 1850 that Rossetti met Elizabeth Siddal, a beautiful young milliner's assistant. Possessed of magnificent reddish-blond hair and a pale unearthly complexion, she soon became the archetypal Pre-Raphaelite model. Under Rossetti's influence, the relatively uneducated girl revealed a talent for poetry and drawing, thus demonstrating one of his most cherished theories. But the relationship was to prove unhappy. The streak of Latin sensuality in Rossetti's temperament accorded ill with the chivalrous idealism he and his friends proclaimed. The result was an excessively long and guilt-stricken engagement, aggravated by poverty, by Lizzy's ill-health and by Rossetti's repeated infidelities. He began to doubt his talent as a painter and experienced a conflict in his creative economy between painting and poetry. Ironically, it now seems his most fruitful period: the time of his first works in watercolour, the wonderfully intimate drawings of Lizzy Siddal, and his best lyrical poems – 'The Woodspurge', 'Sudden Light' and 'The Honeysuckle' – all of which reflect the vagaries of their relationship.

In 1860 Rossetti finally married her. He clearly did so out of a misguided sense of duty, for the famous beauty was already beginning to fade. The following year she gave birth to a still-born child. Then in 1862, already heavily dependent on laudanum, she took an overdose of the drug and died. The coroner's verdict

was accidental death but Rossetti took it for suicide and blamed himself for it: because of his preoccupation with his poetry, because of other women, because of the inadequacy of his love. Many of the other women were 'rescued' prostitutes, a class of woman he was drawn to, but it seems almost certain that by 1862 he was in love with Jane Morris – with the wife, that is to say, of one of his closest friends. Out of these emotional complexities came the richest of his poetic achievements, the sonnet-sequence 'The House of Life'. Rossetti worked on this sequence for the whole of his creative life – from 1848 to 1881 – but the tension that gives it its dramatic substance comes from the presence alongside Lizzy Siddal of a second and secret love. This *Innominata* (as Paull Franklin Baum calls her) may represent a number of different women, but that she is mainly Jane Morris can no longer seriously be denied. Janey now became the main subject of his painting and, between 1871 and 1874, the period when William Morris was often travelling in Iceland, Rossetti shared the Morris family home of Kelmscott Manor.

The story of Rossetti's later life is a painful one. He had always had a morbid streak, but its effects had been outweighed by his good qualities: warmth, charm, unconventionality, a talent for conversation, a boyish and irreverent sense of fun and, beneath it all, an idealism without trace of pomposity. Now, tormented by guilt, he became subject to chronic insomnia. A few important friendships sustained him throughout his final years, but for much of the time he lived out a punishing solitude. The paintings of the period – the brooding icons of Janey as various goddesses and *femmes fatales* – are haunted and dense with despair, and the same is true of much of 'The House of Life'. The contrast with his early work, its freshness like a medieval tapestry's, could not be more disheartening. The poems return again and again to the problem of sleeplessness, which Rossetti sought to cure with increasingly large doses of chloral and whisky. But these only aggravated the problem. In 1871 a prurient attack on the 'fleshiness' of his poetry (a particular object was the sonnet 'Nuptial Sleep') had wounded him deeply, disturbing him no doubt with its grain of truth. This led to a suicide attempt and a nervous breakdown. Under these pressures his health began to fail, but

it was not until 1882 that it finally gave way. He was only fifty-four when he died.

Rossetti's career as a poet really begins with his translations. *The Early Italian Poets* (later re-titled *Dante and his Circle*) appeared in 1861 when he was 33, but he seems to have embarked on the work as early as 1846. According to his brother William Michael, who edited his *Works*, the bulk of the poems were complete by 1848, though he seems to have carried on working at them till 1850. When the book eventually appeared, as William Michael tells us, 'it was recognized that the poetical faculty evinced in it was something more than that of a simple translator'. This success encouraged Rossetti to push on with his own poems. By the time of Lizzy's death he had assembled a substantial collection but – the macabre story is well-known – blaming his poetry for her suicide, he buried the book in her coffin. When in the mid 1860s, moved by his feelings for Janey Morris, he began writing sonnets again, his friends persuaded him to have the book exhumed and in 1870 he published his first collection, which he called simply *Poems*. In 1881 this was expanded to two volumes, *Poems* and *Ballads and Sonnets*, the latter containing new poems and the completed text of 'The House of Life'.

Rossetti's translation of the *Vita Nuova* (The New Life) was the first English translation of Dante's first great work. For most English readers until that time, Dante was the author of *The Divine Comedy* and nothing else. To 'The New Life' Rossetti added a selection of short lyrics by the young Dante and other poets of his circle, notably Guido Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia. These are the thirteenth century Tuscan poets praised in the *Purgatorio* for their 'sweet new style' (*dolce stil novo*). Rossetti then went on to translate some of their Sicilian and Central Italian precursors, all of them dialect poets but effectively the first to write in Italian vernacular. These earlier poets mostly deal with the same limited theme – the lover's devotion to his lady – but are brilliantly inventive in their formal schemes. In both these respects they are largely dependent on the Provençal Troubadours of the previous century. The thematic range was deepened and extended in the work of the Bolognese poet Guido Guinizelli (or Guinicelli), to

whom Dante and Cavalcanti looked as their master. The values they share with him are summed up in his great 'Canzone: Of the Gentle Heart', one of Rossetti's *tours de force* as a translator. Our worth as human beings, for Guinizelli, has nothing to do with lineage or wealth but with the refinement of our natural disposition. Our capacity for love, in this view of the world, is an index of our spiritual nobility, our 'gentleness'. It is not difficult to see how, from these notions, the idea develops of the lover living a life of service to a lady who may never acknowledge it, let alone reward it; nor of how what began as a kind of attachment, adulterous in spirit if not in practice, was to become through Dante's Beatrice a model of divine love: one which, correctly understood, might lead the lover to his own salvation.

There can be no doubt that Rossetti in some respects dilutes the philosophical force of his originals. Some key terms are inherently untranslatable: *virtú*, for instance, which means spiritual potency, or *gentile*, which is noble or refined; Rossetti translates these 'virtue' and 'gentle', justified in that our modern usage has grown from these early poems and their influence, but lacking the concrete force of the Italian. His heavily Romantic archaising diction, moreover, misses the lightness and colloquial vigour of early Italian speech. But few translators can be said to have so memorably naturalized the vision and experience of a culture remote from our own. The best comparison is Pound's *Cathay*, and Rossetti is among the very few translators not shamed by that comparison. But, as William Michael said of them, 'the translations serve... as a kind of prologue to Rossetti's personality among the English poets.' In other words, Rossetti learnt his craft in the translator's *atelier*. A close examination of his work will reveal that almost all his important characteristics have their roots in his first serious literary endeavour.

These characteristics may be summarized under four headings: (1) formal invention; (2) the play of allegory with autobiography; (3) the sublimation of sexual love; (4) intense particularity of images.

The first of these is less important for Rossetti's own poetry than it is for the translations themselves and their influence on Modernist poets such as Pound and Bunting. Every one of

Rossetti's version follows his original in rhyme-scheme, line-length and stanzaic pattern. Since the rhyme-schemes of early medieval poetry are often elaborate, with lace-like patterns of internal rhyme offsetting the rhymed endings, the translations represent a remarkable achievement of craftsmanship. One could argue, indeed, that the ultimate cost to Rossetti was too great, for his own poems sometimes suffer in rhythmic variety and *élan* from an over-precise attention to formal prescription. Nevertheless, the exercise of this discipline led to kinds of stanzaic movement which modern critics have thought of as absent from English verse between Traherne and Hopkins. Take these lines from Jacopo Lentino, a Sicilian of the mid-Thirteenth Century:

For Love has made me weep  
    With sighs that do him wrong,  
Since, when most strong my joy, he gave this woe.  
    I am broken, as a ship  
    Perishing of the song,  
Sweet, sweet and long the songs the sirens know.  
    The mariner forgets,  
    Voyaging in those straits,  
    And dies assuredly.  
    Yea, from her pride perverse,  
    Who hath my heart as hers,  
    Even such my death must be.

The movement in that first sentence, the forcing of syntax against stanza, represents a kind of internal drama that recalls Metaphysical poetry.

The second and third characteristics, autobiography and sublimated love, are both Dantesque and may be treated together. Instead of the vast Thomist summation of reality in which Dante's private passion takes its place, we have a sublimation of erotic feeling that is purely subjective. That the vision is vastly inferior cannot be denied, but it is sentimental to suppose (as Rossetti clearly did not) that the Dantesque unity could be attained in the modern world. Like his Modernist successors, Rossetti took from Dante those things that were available to him in his own experience

and constructed his own subjective and fragmented universe out of them. Rossetti's is a poetry which admits that for us today there are no universal explanations.

Cling heart to heart; nor of this hour demand  
Whether in very truth, when we are dead,  
Our hearts shall wake to know Love's golden head  
Sole sunshine of the imperishable land;  
Or but discern, through night's unfeatured scope,  
Scorn-fired at length the illusive eyes of Hope.

Much of what he learned from the Italians is there: not only the blend of image and abstraction, but the play of allegory and personification which he found in the *Vita Nuova*, where Love, 'a spiritual essence', is represented as 'a thing outward and visible'. Dante constructs an allegory out of the facts of his own life; Rossetti in 'The House of Life' does something analogous, but there is no 'lady round whom splendours move / In homage' at the end of it to foreshadow a great vision of the Love that moves the stars. Dante, within this context risks the charge of blasphemy (comparing an earthly woman to the Redeemer, as he does by implication in 'I felt a spirit of love begin to stir') but his devotional context permits a narrow escape. Guinizelli lets himself off less lightly with a prayer:

Then may I plead: 'As though from thee he came,  
Love wore an angel's face:  
Lord, if I loved her, count it not my shame.'

Rossetti in the fantasy heaven of 'The Blessed Damozel' would plainly stand accused, were it not for the fact that we never begin to take it seriously. The reason why there is no risk becomes clearer when we turn to 'The Portrait', where the immortality of the loved woman is secured by a work of art. As far as the immortality of the soul is concerned, Rossetti neither affirms nor denies it. So, where in Dante or Guinizelli sexual love and the beauty of the lady foreshadow the love of God and the kingdom of heaven, in Rossetti they prepare us for the religion of Art: