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Dante and Rossetti: Translation, Pastiche, Ritual, Fate

Jerome J McGann

Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 2005

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The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1998

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Jerome J. McGann

Chairman: Professor Isobel Armstrong

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SINCE PERCEPTION ITSELF IS NEVER complete, since our perspectives give us a world to express and think about that envelopes and exceeds those perspectives, ... why should the expression of the world be subjected to the prose of the senses or of the concept? It must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen... How long it takes... before a writer learns to speak with his own voice. Similarly, how long it takes the painter – who does not, as we do, have his work spread out before him, but who creates it – to recognize in his first paintings the features of what will be his completed work.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence'

Late in February 1870, in the final proof stage for his new book of *Poems*, Rossetti added three sonnets to 'The House of Life' sequence. One of these, 'Life-in-Love', reflects a profound engagement with the *Vita Nuova*, the single most important work for understanding Rossetti's imaginative goals. The first version of the sonnet began thus:

Not in my body is my life at all,
But in my lady's lips and hands and eyes

That text would not sustain itself and with Rossetti's final revisions it became:

Not in thy body is thy life at all,
But in this lady's lips and hands and eyes¹

¹ All quotations from the poetry are taken from *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. A Hypermedia Research Archive*, to be published shortly (online) by U. of Michigan Press. The standard edition hitherto has been *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis, 1911), which may be consulted for most of the textual materials quoted in this essay.

The changes might seem small enough – a mere alteration of three pronouns. My/my/my become thy/thy/this. But the alteration is major, for this reason: it cancels the first personal perspective of the original text. The resulting shift exposes a characteristic feature of Rossetti's poetic style. When he turns himself into a second person, as happens here, a certain distanciation enters the verse, as if *the poem* had assumed an identity and had begun speaking of the poet and the lady.

There are plenty of sonnets in 'The House of Life' that preserve a first person rhetoric. Nevertheless, Rossetti (like, say, Wallace Stevens) regularly moves to 'sublime' or idealize his rhetoric. Just before publishing his augmented version of 'The House of Life' in 1881 he considered printing a 'disavowel of personality in the sonnets'. He had in mind to print the following prose note as a preface to the sonnet sequence

To speak in the first person is *often* to speak most vividly; but these emotional poems are in no sense 'occasional'. The 'Life' involved is life representative, as associated with love and death, with aspiration & foreboding, or with ideal art and beauty. Whether the recorded moment exist in the region of fact or of thought is a question indifferent to the Muse, so long only as her touch can quicken it.²

In the end he decided against publishing this explanatory note. He probably came to think that the 'disavowel' might itself be taken as an unneeded personal intervention. So he let the sonnets speak for themselves, as it were.

Rossetti's namesake and master, Dante Alighieri, stands behind this cultivated and idealizing style. Dante and other early Italian poets taught Rossetti how to make poems, as well as their generated textual creatures, speak in their own right. The style culminates in Dante's great canzone 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore', where the poet summons to speech an array of characters including an angel, God, Love, and Dante's very poem, and in an especially remarkable moment the poet in propria persona quotes a remark he himself apparently will have made after death. The allegorical theatricalities of Rossetti's great sonnet sequence 'The House of Life' trace their origin to the translation work Rossetti began in his late teens.

The importance of this fact about Rossetti's work disappeared when his influential translations came under 20th-century attack. A gulf seemed to separate Rossetti's erotic style from the conceptual rigors of Dante's work. This view of the matter carries a related and even more significant misconception: that Rossetti's art, both pictorial and verbal, lacks theoretical rigor. Though

² This note appears in several of Rossetti's surviving manuscripts and proofs.

these critical judgements come in Modernist trappings, they trace themselves back to the notorious 'Fleshly School' controversy of the 1870s. The erotic focus of Rossetti's work kept Buchanan from seeing the elaborate argument for Intellectual Beauty that Rossetti was pursuing. Leavis and Eliot experience a similar failure of imagination when they try to negotiate Shelley and Swinburne.

The truth about Rossetti is not easy to discern in a Modernist neo-classical horizon. For while Rossetti is, as Eliot knew, an erotic and a romantic artist, he cultivates artifice and an impersonal rhetoric. The pictorial and textual surfaces are alike, and paradoxically, voluptuous in a second- person style, as it were. The aesthetic illusion seeks not a display of sincerity but a form of thought.

Like Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Klee, Rossetti is first and foremost a conceptual artist. His primary idea is to return to the Middle Ages for procedural models in art and poetry. In the case of poetry, Dante is his chief inspiration and the *Vita Nuova* is both point of departure and determining text.³ Rossetti translated the work in the 1840s and 1850s, along with a large body of poetry by Dante and a related circle of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian poets. When he came finally to publish these translations in 1861, the *Vita Nuova* was made the pivotal work. The pronominal changes that appear in the sonnet 'Life-in-Love' reflect Rossetti's desire to carry out for himself a stylistic program that has much in common with the program Dante had defined in his autobiography.

A key text is *Vita Nuova* section XIX, where Dante situates the work's most important poetical text, the famous canzone 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore'. According to Dante's argument, the poem emerges from a series of frustrated attempts (recorded in the previous sections of the *Vita Nuova*) to write poems – sonnets in fact – that would express the full truth of his love for Beatrice. These frustrations climax in section XVIII, where Dante's poetry is severely criticized by one of the ladies to whom he had shown his work. When he answers that the function of his poetry is to 'praise my lady', the woman bluntly tells him that he has failed – perhaps worse, that he is self-deceived. 'If thy speech were true, those words which thou didst write concerning thy condition would have been written with another intent'. What she means is that Dante's verse does not so much reveal the glory of Beatrice as the psychic state of the poet. In short, it is merely personal.

Section XIX dramatizes Dante's self-conscious turn to a style that allows the poet's language to become an index—an instantiation—not of himself or his feelings but of 'questa tua beautitudine', of Beatrice. Moved by a desire to write

³ The reference text for Dante's autobiography is Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, Con una guida alla lettura di Eduardo Sanguinetti. iv edizione (Milano: Garzanti, 1984).

more verse, Dante makes the key decision to write ‘in seconda persona’, in the second person, to ladies that have intelligence of love. This decision brings with it a sweet new style: ‘Allora dico che la mia lingua parlo quasi come per se stessa mossa; e disse: *Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*.’ Rossetti translates this crucial Dante passage thus: ‘Whereupon I declare that my tongue spake as though by its own impulse, and said, ‘Ladies that have intelligence of love.’

The translation is what Randall McLeod would call a ‘transformission’; that is to say, it is as much Rossetti as it is Dante.⁴ Rendering Dante’s ‘mia lingua parlo’ as ‘my tongue spake’ is more Rossettian than Dantean, for it casts Dante’s figure of impersonality into physical, even fleshly, terms. It also misses an important literal feature of Dante’s word. Dante works the word ‘lingua’ – it isn’t exactly a pun – to signify two important matters: first, his poem is grounded in speech, the ‘mother tongue’ that figures so prominently in his decision to write in Italian rather than Latin; and second, the canzone appears to have been authored not by Dante personally but by Dante’s *language*, as if his language were a living Being capable of independent and authorizing acts. Although Dante is a presence in his canzone, none of the first personal pronouns reference himself.

There is no question that Rossetti’s translation has altered the sense of Dante’s original. The translation is, literally, more ‘fleshly’. On the other hand, there is also no question that Rossetti understood very well what Dante was doing. We realize this from a note Rossetti appended to section XXV of his translation of the *Vita Nuova*. This section comprises an extended explanation of Dante’s sweet new style of idealization, its historical origins, and its philosophical purpose. In this discussion Dante implicitly argues how vulgar poetry ‘during the last hundred and fifty years’ acquired true philosophical potential. In that period arose ‘the writing of rhymes in spoken language corresponding to the writing in metre of Latin verse’. This new work ‘in the vulgar tongue’ began, Dante says, when the poet wanted

to make himself understood of a certain lady, unto whom Latin poetry was difficult. This thing is against such as rhyme concerning other matters than love; that made of speech having been first used for the expression of love alone.

Rossetti’s adds a note to this text: ‘It strikes me that this curious passage furnishes a reason, hitherto (I believe) overlooked, why Dante put such of his

⁴ See his ‘Information on Information’, in TEXT 5, eds. D. C. Greetham and W. Speed Hill (New York: AMS Press, 1991), 241–84.

lyrical poems as relate to philosophy into the form of love-poems.' Rossetti is trying to make explicit what Dante has left largely to implication. Dante's text is reflecting on the philosophical import of his own early love-poetry, all written in Italian. More specifically, the text reaches back to Section XIX and the canzone written to those ladies who have intelligence of love – that is, to those who possess and even incarnate true philosophical understanding even though they have no knowledge of Latin. For the key to such intelligence and understanding is not erudition or conceptual skill, it is the actual experience of love.

Rossetti's love poetry takes its intellectual pretensions from Dante's lead. For both, to write of love is to engage a philosophical discourse. However, that discourse for both must be framed impersonally. The point is to dramatize as clearly as possible the objective dynamic presence of love in the world. It is not to express personal feelings. The latter figure prominently in the dynamic of love, but both poets strove for a style that would reconstruct feelings and other impalpable realities (like ideas and spiritual presences) into an objective, that is (in this case) into a purely linguistic or semiotic, condition. The allegorical figurations so characteristic of both poets locate the philosophical urgency of their styles.

So a sonnet like 'Life-in Love' involves a programmatic nineteenth-century reconstruction of the poetic style Dante evolved and explained when he wrote the *Vita Nuova*. The sonnet appears to address the poet in the second person, as Dante's canzone 'Donne ch'avete' appears to address the ladies that have intelligence of love. Throughout 'The House of Life' these kinds of distancing effects are produced. The sonnet that follows 'Life-in-Love', for example, 'The Love Moon', is a textual dialogue between octave and sestet. Personified Love speaks the octave, but the respondent of the sestet is ambiguous: we may take it to be either the voice of the poet or the voice of the poem. In either case it is a voice, not a person, an important distinction that would hardly have been lost on the author of a canzone like 'Donne ch'avete'. We take it to be the voice of the poem when we negotiate Rossetti's texts as expressions of style, at the rhetorical level. We perceive the voice of the poet when our response registers the constative features of his texts. Rossetti regularly leaves both options open to his readers, for he builds his sequence with a variety of sonnets, some in a personal rhetoric, some in the rhetoric of 'Life-in Love'. This diversity replicates Dante's procedure in the *Vita Nuova*.

Because Rossetti's sequence lacks a prose narrative like Dante's *Vita Nuova*, his poems proliferate ambiguities that we don't find in Dante. Rossetti doesn't only construct a style in which poems, ideas, and various spiritual idealities may

appear to speak in *propriae personae*. He constructs a style that appears to have its own identity, including the power to raise up figural presences possessing equivalent self-motivating authority and independent existence. Once again the sonnet 'Life-in Love' exemplifies the situation very well, especially in the context of its placement in 1881 in the more elaborated sequence of 'The House of Life'. Unlike the poem in the shorter 1870 sequence, the sonnet in 1881 follows a group in which a rhetoric of second-person address envelopes the figure of the poet's beloved. Any reading of 'Life-in-Love' in that context comes with the possibility that the second-person address in line 1—the pair of 'thy' pronouns—might not reference the poet, which would probably be our first thought, but might be directed to the woman named 'my lady' several sonnets earlier (see especially 'Soul-Light', 'The Moonstar', and 'Venus Victrix'). Or is 'this lady' of line 2 in 'Life-in-Love' the same person as 'my lady' addressed earlier? Or is she someone else altogether? The text raises up all these textual possibilities as iconic forms, figural presences.

These reading complications develop because Rossetti's verse is making a studied use of another distinctive feature of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. He is modifying the Dantean figure of the screen lady ('*donna schermo*') first introduced in section V of Dante's autobiographical treatise. To appreciate what Rossetti is doing we should reconsider some general matters about Rossetti's 'House of Life'.

As already observed, a certain narrative, by no means unambiguous, plays out a secret life within and below the elaborate ornamental surface of Rossetti's sonnet sequence. Whatever else may be true of this poetical construction, and leaving aside autobiographical matters for the moment, the drama has at least three key players: the poet plus (at least) two beloved women.

Problems arise repeatedly, however, when readers try to identify particular texts with one or another of these women. 'Life-in-Love' supplies an excellent instance of such a problem, for it is clear that the sonnet is discussing two women. It is not clear, however, how we are to assign the pronouns' references.

Biographical information helps to elucidate these stylistic problems. Rossetti told his friend Alice Boyd that this sonnet 'refers to an actual love with a reminiscence of a former one'.⁵ He did not say this to encourage a 'limitedly personal' reading of the sonnet; on the contrary, in fact. And when we read the sonnet in face of his remark we realize that none of the stylistic problems are resolved by what he told Alice Boyd. The pronouns preserve their strange ambiguities. But the remark locates the formal limits of the

5 See *The Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, 4 vols. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), II. 821 (cited hereafter as *Letters*).

ambiguous references of the second and third person pronouns in the octave. Furthermore, the biographical frame of reference lets us see that the sestet's 'poor tress of hair' relates to the 'former' love (more specifically, to Rossetti's dead wife Elizabeth), and once again this data helps to define a formal quality of the sonnet. The vivid hair of the dead woman is a figure of the continuing presence of the dead among the living. As such, it underscores all the haunting and ambiguous presences raised up in the octave.

In the textual event, therefore, the octave realizes *precisely* the following set of ambiguous imaginations. Taking the text as spoken by the poet, we must negotiate simultaneously these possible readings:

1. My life is not in my body but in the invigorating body of the lady before me, whose presence vivifies my morbid condition, which remains preoccupied with the woman I loved but who is now lost to me—who is in fact dead, as I feel myself to be, etc.
2. Your life, my dead love, is not in your dead body, but lives again in the vivifying body of the woman before me now, etc.
3. [In this reading the text is a set of inner reflections that begin with a recollection of the dead beloved, who becomes the referent of 'this lady' just as the woman present to the poet becomes the referent of 'thy' in line 1; hence we get:] Your life, my lady, is not a function of your physical being, which is mortal and subject to change and decay, but of a certain spiritual identity whose living presence remains active among us from a transcendental order of reality.
4. Finally, several variations on these possibilities emerge (a) if we take the sonnet to be an impersonal expression, and (b) if we disassociate the third person pronouns in lines 3 and 5 ('she' and 'her') from 'this lady'.

These kinds of ambiguities, recurrent in 'The House of Life', clearly recall Dante's special development of the troubador convention that licensed poets to address fictional lovers in order to conceal the identities of their true loves. In Rossetti the question continually arises: when the poet addresses love to one or the other of the two principal women realized in 'The House of Life', does she function as a screen for the other? Or, indeed, are both ultimately screen ladies – perhaps instantiations for 'the Muse' Rossetti mentions in the note to

the sonnet sequence that he didn't publish with the 1881 text.

To appreciate what is happening in Rossetti's text we want to recall how Dante explains his relation to 'questa gentile donna schermo'. In section V of the *Vita Nuova* Dante sees Beatrice in church, and as he gazes on her he realizes another woman stands in his line of sight. The latter, believing that Dante is looking at her:

looked around at me many times, marvelling at my continued gaze, which seemed to have *her* for its object. And many perceived that she thus looked; so that, departing thence, I heard it whispered after me, 'Look you to what a pass such a *lady* hath brought him.'

Dante is pleased that this mistaken judgement conceals the true object of his devotion from the public:

and immediately it came to my mind that I might make use of this lady as a screen to the truth; and so well did I play my part that the most of those who had hitherto watched and wondered at me, now imagined they had found me out. By her means I kept my secret concealed till some years were gone over; and for my better security, I even made divers rhymes in her honour.

The next five sections of the *Vita Nuova* centre in Dante's relations with the screen lady, or rather screen ladies, for he makes another woman a screen lady when the first departs the city. These events culminate in section X, where Beatrice refuses Dante her salutation. The refusal is directly related to Dante's use of the screen lady, which has caused evil reports to spread about him.

The focus of all these events is the poetry Dante writes. It has two objects: to express his devotion to Beatrice, his spiritual ideal-love, and to disguise that devotion in poetry which seems to have other objects – specifically, other women – in view. A poem like 'O voi che par la via d'Amor passate' (in section VII) is specifically presented as double-faced: in one view it is a lament for the departure of Dante's screen lady, in another it is an expression of his love for Beatrice. Both meanings are of course related, for Dante's commitment to the screen lady has all along been conceived as a device to further his love for Beatrice. The two sonnets of section VIII have a similar doubleness: in one perspective they lament the death of a young woman known to Beatrice, in another they are written to glorify Beatrice, whose goodness shows itself in her grief at her friend's death. Rossetti's note to the sonnets in his translation discusses the critical disputes that have argued whether the poems 'do not

allude to the dead lady, but to Beatrice'. He concludes that 'Most probably *both* allusions are intended'.

Rossetti responded strongly to this kind of elusive and allusive artifice in Dante's work. Disguised and doubled meanings play across the writing, as Dante himself tells us; and while Rossetti did not endorse his father's famous exegeses of Dante, he clearly read the poetry in an analogous way.⁶ Discussing the sonnets in section V, for example, the English poet speculates about various 'covert allusion[s] to Beatrice' in different passages. The 'donna schermo' device governs the management of the poet's love-devotions in 'The House of Life', as we see when readers try to identify certain of the sonnets with particular ladies. These critical moves mirror those of the 'commentators' Rossetti recollects in his note to section V.

'Probably *both* allusions are intended': here Rossetti works a distinctive modification upon Dante's coded writing. In simplest terms it might be put thus: that Rossetti's imagined loves can function simultaneously as either Beatricean image or as 'donna schermo'. What this means is that they are always constructed as images. As such, Dante's figural hierarchy gets levelled and reordered in Rossetti. A sonnet like 'The Portrait' illustrates the change very well:

O Lord of all compassionate control,
 O Love! let this my lady's picture glow
 Under my hand to praise her name, and show
 Even of her inner self the perfect whole:
 That he who seeks her beauty's furthest goal,
 Beyond the light that the sweet glances throw
 And refluant wave of the sweet smile, may know
 The very sky and sea-line of her soul.

Lo! It is done. Above the enthroning throat
 The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss,
 The shadowed eyes remember and foresee.
 Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note
 That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)
 he that would look on her must come to me.

⁶ This is to say, whereas Gabriele Rossetti searched the texts for coded political references, his son was attentive partly to hidden biographical connections, and partly to mythic and quasi-philosophical patterns that were involved with the biographical details. When people refer to Rossetti's interest in spiritualism and 'superstition', and when scholars track lines of 'mystical' and 'spiritual' ideas in his work, they are registering matters that connect to his characteristic way of reading as well.

The multiple action of this sonnet appears graphically if we ask: is ‘The Portrait’ the sonnet, or does the text reference some picture? That question exposes a whole range of ambiguities that play through the verse. As usual in Rossetti, the pronouns lie open to multiple references, nor do we have a determinate ‘speaker’ of the sonnet. The final ‘me’, for example, simultaneously points to four realized identities: a poet, a painter, and the verbal or pictorial work that one or the other would have created. These four connections then uncover a faint but crucial fifth, ‘Love’, whose presence dominates the poem and who is finally declared to have made of ‘this’ a gift. But what is ‘this’? The pronoun here locates a complex noun clause – a nominated action involving various figures, each of which is subsumed within the action, each of which fully (if not completely) incarnates the action. In the end we cannot *not* see that the gift is in some important sense (as it were) Love himself (or, in yet another alternative, ‘herself’ since Love and the Beloved, as in Dante, often merge their identities).

Rossetti’s poetry, then, does not define and instantiate so much persons (Jane Morris, Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth, etc.) as the presence and action of Love in the world. Identities, as well as the names and words that signify them, are fluid, dynamic markers of the presence of that action. Love is at once an ideal and a physical experience for Rossetti, as it was for Dante, and both study how the ideal goal can be advanced and/or hindered by Love’s mortalities. Whereas Dante represents this psychic drama as a process of growth and enlightenment, however, Rossetti perceives it as a kind of permanent dialectic of energizing change. An objective moral order supervenes the action in Dante, whereas in Rossetti the action supplies its own rationale. It pivots on what Rossetti called an ‘inner standing point’.⁷

Rossetti appropriates from Dante one other aesthetic procedure of great importance: both men develop a programmatic attitude toward poetic revision. In his note to section XXV Rossetti comments on the fact that the *Vita Nuova* and its imbedded poems were not written at the same time. Rossetti is well aware that the poems were often written – as the lady of section XVIII says to Dante – ‘con altro intendimento’. The first sonnet in the *Vita Nuova*, for example, is an early composition that gains its relation to Beatrice only from its inclusion in Dante’s programmatic autobiography. The most famous of Dante’s revisionary moves – his interpretation of the *Vita Nuova’s* donna della finestra episode (sections XXXV–XXXVIII) as a philosophical allegory – produced one of the great interpretive cruxes in Dantescan studies: is the donna a woman

⁷ The practise of writing from an ‘inner standing point’ represents one of the key features of Rossetti’s work. He formulated the idea early, in a note he attached to the poem ‘Ave’, and he adverted to it again much later in his critical reply to Buchanan’s notorious attack, Rossetti’s essay ‘The Stealthy School of Criticism’.

who for a time drew Dante's affections away from Beatrice, or is she rather a figural representation of Lady Philosophy, who would have come to Dante's aid in his grief at Beatrice's death?

Dante's example of constructing the *Vita Nuova* around materials that originally had an 'altro intendimento', and of reconstructing it later through radical interpretive revision, had a major impact on the way Rossetti imagined his own work. The 1870 *Poems*, and 'The House of Life' in particular, use poetic materials that were originally written in completely different contexts. Signal texts of this kind are the three sonnets 'The Landmark', 'A Dark Day', and 'Autumn Idleness', which were all written in the early 1850s. When Rossetti decides in 1869–70 to include such poems in 'The House of Life', he forces them to take on meanings that he could not have consciously intended when he wrote them many years before. These poetic reimaginings develop an important aesthetic argument: that work written in one context and with certain intentions may contain secret and unrealized meanings that only emerge over time and through the coming of unimagined events. (Rossetti's thought here has much in common with Surrealist ideas, and especially with the arguments Breton makes in *Les vases communicants*.)⁸

If Rossetti follows Dante's lead in thus developing a prophetic view of imaginative work (both pictorial and textual, in Rossetti's case), he is also introducing a fundamental reinterpretation of Dante's aesthetic position as Dante himself represented it in the *Convivio*. In the latter Dante gives his famous interpretation of the *Vita Nuova's* donna della finestra as Lady Philosophy. He does this through a close reading of his canzone 'Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete' (*Convivio* II, 2,12). In a note to his translation of the donna della finestra episode Rossetti argues for 'the existence always of the actual events even where the allegorical superstructure has been raised by Dante himself'. Like Dante, Rossetti identifies the donna della finestra with Lady Philosophy; unlike Dante, he insists on preserving her as a real woman as well.

The consequence of such a view can be seen in 'The House of Life' when Rossetti recapitulates the *Vita Nuova's* donna della finestra episode in an equivalent sequence. The pivotal text for this act of reconstruction is the sonnet 'Life-in-Love', where 'we meet for the first time *unmistakeably* in the sequence the New Beloved', as Pauli Baum, one of Rossetti's most acute interpreters, has noted.⁹

⁸ I.e., the argument with Freud about the direction, as it were, of libidinal desire. Breton argues that it is not primarily memorial but, rather, prophetic. See André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska Press, 1990).

⁹ See *The House of Life. A Sonnet Sequence*. By Dante Gabriel Rossetti, e d. Paull Franklin Baum (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1928), 115.

The *Vita Nuova* so strongly affects Dante that his love for Beatrice suffers an eclipse. So the New Beloved enters 'The House of Life' to force a complex reimagination of the nature of Love.

Dante's *Convivio* explanation of the episode, which identifies Love with philosophy, implicitly argues for a non-erotic understanding of Love. Rossetti's thought moves along an exact contrary. Insisting on the 'real presence' of the donna della finestra (and of the women invested in his own 'Life-in-Love' sonnet), Rossetti is arguing that the identity of Love and Philosophy is grounded in Eros, that is, in incarnate and reciprocal desire. The abstract title of the sonnet – and of so many of the sonnets in 'The House of Life' – locates the conceptual orientation of Rossetti's argument. 'Idea' functions in his work as figural form, as image, and is assigned no independent conceptual privileges. For Rossetti, Philosophy can be identified with Love only if it functions in a dynamic rather than in a conceptual field, only if it 'vivifies', as 'Life-in-Love' puts the matter. Explanation comes as apparition, as revelation. The logic of such a view plays itself out in 'The House of Life', where understanding is pursued through a series of intense moments, not all of them by any means moments of pleasure or satisfaction. One possesses a 'philosophic mind' not as a cherished or anticipated goal, but as an immediate determination to imagine what one doesn't know.

II

'To imagine what one doesn't know': I borrow this phrase from the contemporary poet and critic Lisa Samuels.¹⁰ Consciously revising Shelley's prophetic injunction in the 'Defence of Poetry' to 'imagine what we know', Samuels asks us to reconsider, as it were, the intelligence quotient of the imagination. Her thinking connects most immediately with works like William Carlos Williams' *The Embodiment of Knowledge*.

I appropriate Samuels' idea in this context because it recalls Rossetti's effort to appropriate Dante and the world of Medieval Catholic sensibilities. Rossetti's translations are attempts to imagine something unknowable. If Rossetti could see and otherwise appreciate the splendours of that world – cultural, ideological, aesthetic – the world nonetheless stood beyond his ken, lost for ever. Intellectual and academic attempts to recover it through historicist researches and redactions only emphasized the separating gulf. The *selva oscura* of Rossetti's scholarly father is the point of departure for all his

¹⁰ See Lisa Samuels, 'Introduction to Poetry and the Problem of Beauty', *Modern Language Studies* 27 (spring 1997), 2.

work. And translation becomes the sign under which Rossetti will seek, first, to expose the truth of this gulf, and second, to cross its void.

The special Rossettian value of translation centers in a key paradox. Rossetti founded his work, and especially his textual work, on an art of radical imitation. Within a romantic tradition, which is certainly Rossetti's, high values are placed on originality, and the arts of imitation go at a discount. Rossetti's romanticism, however, begins in imitation. A further range of this paradox emerges when we think back to Rossetti through the best single work ever written about his verse: Pater's summatory essay of 1880. Pater saw Rossetti as the most innovative writer of the period, the inventor of a style that would indeed have an overbearing influence on the next generation. Rossetti developed his stylistic resources through his exercises in translation. Nor did he set himself to produce relatively 'free' translations in a technical point of view. His goal was not equivalence, it was imitation ('literality'). This procedure would lead him to develop an art of pastiche and ritual form, and to explore the possibility that imaginative work possesses wondrous and terrifying powers of transrational understanding.

The success of these imitations has been measured in several ways. We know how much they were admired in Rossetti's day and beyond, and we know how deeply they impinged on the work of later Modernists like Yeats, Pound, and Eliot. The last of these took Rossetti's translations as a point of departure, a useful antithesis, whereas Yeats and Pound turned to the translations as to useful guides and models. Rossetti himself emerged as a fully-developed original writer in the late 1840s largely because of this rigorous and even scholarly linguistic undertaking. The remarkable finish of a work like 'The Blessed Damozel' is no happy accident or mere sign of original genius. Then too, certain of these translations are so excellent as poetry in their own right – like Swinburne's translations of Villon – that they force us to engage them as we engage original works.

Beyond all those matters, however, the translations point to something else that may be even more important. They seem an act of extreme linguistic devotion, as resolute as a cultic or ritual performance. We can easily miss this quality of the poems because we usually read works of translation in terms of their scholarly and pedagogical functions. But all of Rossetti's work, not least of all the early work, seems permeated by magical ideas about art and language. At the time he was doing his translations, for example, he also produced the following text. (It has never been printed and its date, while uncertain, is early, but probably no earlier than the late 1840s.)

Piangendo star con l'anima smarrita,
Fra se dicendo: già sarà in ciel gita
Beata cosa ch'uom chiamava il nome,
Lasso me, e quando e come
Veder io vi potro visibilmente
Si che ancora presente
Far io vi possa. Ti conforto vita!
Dunque mi udite ch'io parlo a posta
D'amor, e ai sospir ponendo sosta.
E inver lei parla d'ogni sua virtute.
E, tutta santa ornai vostra, innamorata
Contemplando nel ciel dov' è locata
Il vostro cor, per cui istà diviso
Che pinto tiene in sì beato viso.¹¹

Clumsy as it is – so unlike Rossetti's elegant translations of the same period – the sonnet is a kind of reverse translation made from his involvement with Dante's *Vita Nuova*. Its consciously antiqued style mimics a late-thirteenth or early fourteenth-century irregular sonnet that might have been written by one of Dante's circle. The choice of couplet rhymes is notable, being common only to low forms of *stil novisti* verse, like street songs. Indeed, the broken surface of the text and its obscure linguistic usages may well be studied effects,

¹¹ A crude translation would be:

Weeping with my soul bewildered,
saying to myself: she has already gone to heaven,
she whom men call by the name Blessed One,
alas, when and how will I be able to see you in a visible form
so that I might have the power to make you
a living presence? So do I comfort my life?
Then listen to me because I speak on purpose
of love and refrain from sighs.

And indeed she speaks of all her grace.

And all you who are now sanctified,
and who contemplate in heaven where
your heart resides, love her through whom
he who has painted such a blessed face
has been tom within himself.

authenticating signs meant to suggest that this is no invention of Rossetti's but a kind of 'found poem' from the fourteenth or fifteenth century.¹²

The texts standing directly behind this act of imitation are clearly from the *Vita Nuova*: the canzoni 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore' and especially 'Li occhi dolenti per pietà del core' as well as the sonnets associated with those canzoni. Rossetti's imitation all but quotes from the canzone 'Li occhi dolenti', which Dante wrote shortly after the death of Beatrice in 1290. The echo is telling not only for this imitation but for Rossetti's work in general, both pictorial and textual. Dante's poem represents Beatrice as a figure of such inspiring beauty that the heavens themselves desire her presence. At once lost and emparadised in death, Beatrice becomes for Dante the guiding focus of his imaginative and spiritual life.

To pastiche that textual scene from Dante amounts to a magical act, as if Rossetti might call back the dead and become invested with – and even possessed by – the soul of Dante. The move is born of an imaginative reaction against the apparent fate of time and history, which throws up, we believe, an uncrossable gulf between disparate cultural scenes like thirteenth-century Italy and nineteenth-century England. Rossetti worked against that secular belief. That his project was impossible is obvious, but that it was a liberating artistic attitude is no less clear. The weight of the Victorian social world and of the empire that sustained it was a powerful, crushing reality. Every English poet of the period either fled it or found some way to evade it (or, like Arnold, abandoned imaginative aspirations altogether). When Rossetti changed his birth name from Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1850, the event was more imperative than symbolic. In changing his name, Rossetti performed a cultic rite, a secular baptism.

Pastiche is the generic sign that dominates Rossetti's early work. Nor is it a sign of apprenticeship or juvenilia. The latter clearly mark the poems of his early and mid-teens - poems like 'Roderick and Rosalba'.¹³ By 1845, when he began the project that would become *The Early Italian Poets*, he was brinked at imaginative maturity. This maturity centered in the translations and all that they entailed. 'The Blessed Damozel' is their most famous outcome, but a poem like 'Piangendo star con l'anima smarrita' is another, and the two, as

12 On the verso of the single surviving manuscript of this work Rossetti has a series of notes including a reference to Abbate Luigi Rigoli's *Saggio di rime di diversi buoni autori. . . dal 14 Fino al 18 secolo*. This book, published in Florence in 1825, was one of Rossetti's sources for his translations. He lists others at the end of his Introduction to *The Early Italian Poets*.

13 This work was only published recently; see William T. Slayton, 'Roderick and Rosalba': D. G. Rossetti's First Juvenile Work,' *Victorian Institute Journal* 17 (1989), 181-191.

anyone can see, have everything in common except their language. The antique mannerisms of the Italian sonnet are matched in the more ambitious stanzas of Rossetti's English poem, which scatters itself with lexical and grammatical archaisms of every kind. To Pater it seemed 'as naively detailed as the pictures of those early painters contemporary with Dante' – the painters that Rossetti so much admired. At times it reads like an old translation that Rossetti has discovered, an English text with its own manifest antiquities:

Circlewise sit they, with bound locks
And foreheads garlanded;
Into the fine cloth white like flame
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robcs for them
Who are just bom, being dead.

Like 'Piangendo star', 'The Blessed Domozel' is a poem with its face set against the age and culture of the Crystal Palace. It is one of a series of early works that define a signal characteristic of Rossetti's entire career. These are the works consciously attempting to resuscitate a gone world. 'Ave', 'Madonna Consolata', the two sonnets accompanying his first oil painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*: are all performative works with ambitious spiritual aims. The same is true of 'Hand and Soul', whose pastiche style is rarely remarked but crucially important.

Rossetti undertakes a stylistic regimen on an analogy with the practise of a religious life. A strict observance of the disciplinary forms is imagined as the means to gain the originary life of the forms. For Rossetti, then, art is a ritual and performative act. Scrupulously practised in imitation of models disconnected from worldly objects, the work is to become what it imitates and beholds. Ultimately this means the acquirement of a kind of transcendental art, i.e., an art that will be seen to have been dictated from Eternity, as Blake, one of Rossetti's masters, saw the matter.¹⁴

Rossetti's success in this audacious venture came quickly and early, as we know. The results would throw him into contact with beautiful and ecstatic orders of reality, Beatricean orders, as he had hoped. But the realm of the uncanny harbors much that is frightening and terrible, and these too Rossetti came to know. Perhaps most terrifying of all, he had to endure the full brunt of what it might mean to have his art dictated from Eternity.

It began as a literary game in 1848, a kind of automatic writing. To test and stimulate their verse skills, Rossetti and his brother would set a rhyme scheme

¹⁴ See for example *Jerusalem* 4:5

for each other. The object was to fashion a sonnet to that scheme as quickly as possible. The sonnets were produced in five to ten minutes each.¹⁵

Fourteen of Dante Gabriel's sonnets survive, though he himself published none of them. That fact is unsurprising since they were all stylistic exercises. But if he never published any of these writings, he did set two of them apart in a special way. These two sonnets were included in the book of manuscript poems that Rossetti interred in February 1862 with the body of his wife Elizabeth. This was the volume, already titled *Dante at Verona and other poems*, that Rossetti was planning to issue as a companion volume to his book of translations *The Early Italian Poets*. The collection of original work was announced for publication in an advert page included in the volume of translations published right at the end of 1861.

But *Dante at Verona and other poems* was never published. Rossetti placed his manuscript copy of the book in his wife's coffin – a hieratic gift of the most important original poetical work he had done, most of it unpublished. Rossetti had no copies of the works he put in his wife's grave. The book was meant as a love-sacrifice – some would say a guilt-sacrifice – of his most valued imaginative possessions.

And there the book remained for over seven years, until Rossetti began to think that he ought to publish his own poetry after all. But as he gathered together his work of his poetical years 1847-1869, he found that several of his most important works were missing: in particular, 'Dante at Verona', 'A Last Confession', 'Jenny', 'The Sea-Limits', and 'St. Luke the Painter'. All these works lay in Elizabeth's coffin in the manuscript book. Suddenly he regretted his ghastly romantic sacrifice of 1862. Driven by a new remorse, Rossetti had the body exhumed in October 1869 by some friends and the manuscript book returned to him. He copied out the poems he wanted, revised them, and published them with his other work a few months later.

But not all the works in the manuscript book were published in the 1870 volume. In particular, the two early sonnets I just mentioned were held back. Yet we know they were part of the exhumed manuscript book because they come down to us on two surviving leaves from that remarkable volume. William Michael would publish both many years after his brother's death, one in 1898, the second in 1911, under titles that he supplied. They are called 'Another Love' and 'Praise and Prayer'.¹⁶

¹⁵ See William Michael Rossetti's notes on the event (in his 1911 edition, p. 673–674n).

¹⁶ The first was first published in William Michael Rossetti's note, 'Some Scraps of Verse and Prose by Dante Gabriel Rossetti,' *Pall Mall Magazine* 16 (1898) 480–496; the second in his edition of 1911.

Another Love

Of her I thought who now is gone so far:
And, the thought passing over, to fall thence
Was like a fall from spirit into sense
Or from the heaven of heavens to sun and star.
None other than Love's self ordained the bar
"Twixt her and me, so that if, going hence,
I met her, it could only seem a dense
Film of the brain, – just nought, as phantoms are.

Now when I passed your threshold and came in,
And glanced where you were sitting, and did see
Your tresses in these braids and your hands thus,--
I knew that other figure, grieved and thin,
That seemed there, yea that was there, could not be,
Though like God's wrath it stood dividing us.

Praise and Prayer

Doubt spake no word in me as there I kneeled.
Loathing, I could not praise: I could not thank
God for the cup of evil that I drank:
I dared not cry upon his strength to shield
My soul from weapons it was bent to wield
Itself against itself. And so I sank
Into the furnished phrases smooth and blank
Which we all learn in childhood, -- and did yield
A barren prayer for life. My voice might mix
With hers, but mingled not. Hers was a full
Grand burst of music, which the crowned Seven
Must have leaned sideways from their seats to fix
In their calm minds. The seraph-songs fell dull
Doubtless, when heard, again, throughout all heaven.

Why didn't Rossetti publish these poems in his 1870 volume? The answer, I think, becomes clear if we make a simple experiment of historical imagination. Think about Rossetti reading these texts in 1862 when he set about copying poems he wanted to include in the manuscript book for his dead wife. The simple verse exercises of 1848 would have become very different poems in

February 1862. In that month a sudden death turned these poetical exercises of 1848 uncanny. They became prophetic poems about his wife, whom he had not even met in 1848.

All this brings us back to Dante, who illuminates the most important part of this interesting and untold story. For Rossetti, the *Vita Nuova* was a narrative that exposed the action of spiritual prevenience in works of imagination. Poems have meanings that are 'Dictated from Eternity', beyond the knowledge or control of the artist. Dante's spiritual autobiography was for Rossetti a demonstration and proof of that fact about art. In his painting and his writing alike, Rossetti regularly reworked earlier materials in order to reveal their concealed, premonitory significances. In no case, however, is this Dantean inheritance more clear than it is in these sonnets, perhaps especially in 'Praise and Prayer'. The sestet of the latter distinctly recalls the two major canzone of *La Vita Nuova*, the 'Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore' and 'Donna pietosa e di novelle etate', as well as Rossetti's other Dante-inspired works of 1847-1848, particularly 'The Blessed Damozel' and 'Piangendo star con l'amina smarrita'.

So the answer to our question about why Rossetti held the two sonnets back has to do with their uncanny transformation. With Elizabeth's death in 1862 the poems had become possessed. As such they came to embody one of Rossetti's most cherished convictions: that works of art involve transrational powers of awareness. But Rossetti couldn't bring himself to enlist these works as part of his book's argument for that idea because their evidentiary status was too personal. Though originally the sonnets were in fact among the least personal of his writings, in 1869 they had become intensely, bizarrely personal. How could Rossetti signal for his readers the magical character of these works? He couldn't and he didn't. Nevertheless, he also couldn't bring himself to destroy such precious evidence of the truth of imagination. Of all the original leaves from the inhumed manuscript volume, only these two were saved.