

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

PAINTER & MAN OF LETTERS

BY
FRANK RUTTER

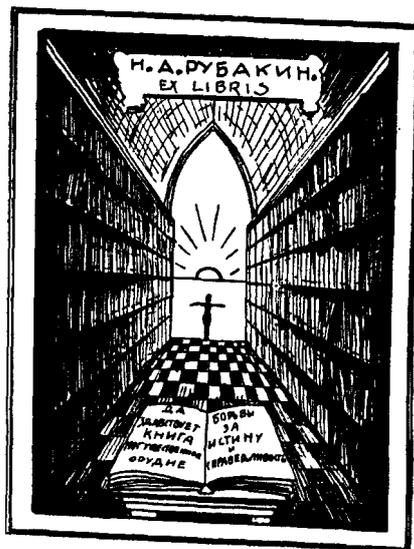


WITH TWENTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON GRANT RICHARDS

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

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PREFACE

So many books, from pens so eminent, have already appeared on the life and work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, that the hazardous experiment of adding to their number could hardly have been made without the direct encouragement of a publisher perhaps too kind. The present monograph cannot claim to contain any new facts or discoveries, the aim of the writer having been to tell the story of Rossetti's life as far as possible in Rossetti's own words and in the words of the most unimpeachable eye-witnesses of his career and progress; while in criticism it has been his constant endeavour to steer a judicial middle course between the Scylla of infatuation and the Charybdis of irrelevant censure. The reader, then, will readily perceive that there is little in the following pages which cannot be found, with more or less trouble, in the multitudinous Rossetti literature already existing.

To Mr. W. M. Rossetti, the standard authority on the subject, grateful acknowledgment is here made for permission to quote at some length both from his brother's Family Letters and his own invaluable Memoir. In addition to the Family Letters with a Memoir, Mr. W. M. Rossetti's 'Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters', 'Rossetti Papers', 'Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pre-Raphaelitism', 'Some Reminiscences', and 'D. G. Rossetti as Designer and Writer' should be named as authorities to be consulted. Many graphic details and incidents in Rossetti's life are also to be found in Mr. F. M. Hueffer's 'Ford Madox Brown,' in Mr. J. W. Mackail's 'Life of William Morris,' in Lady Burne-Jones's 'Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones,' in Mr. W. Holman Hunt's 'Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood,' and Mr. William Bell Scott's 'Autobiographical Notes'.

For illuminating criticism of the highest order the reader may be referred to the papers in Mr. A. C. Swinburne's 'Essays and Studies', Walter Pater's 'Introduction' to Rossetti's poems (1883), the late Dr. Garnett's article on 'D. G. Rossetti' in the 'Dictionary of National Biography,' the section on Rossetti in Mr. D. S. MacColl's 'Nineteenth Century Art,' and Mr. Theodore Watts-Dunton's incomparable essay 'The Truth about Rossetti', which appeared in the 'Nineteenth Century' for March, 1883, and still awaits republication. Mention should also be made of Mr. F. G. Stephens's 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', and the more recent volume on 'Rossetti' (1904), by Mr. Arthur G. Benson. The foregoing is far from exhausting the bibliography of Rossetti but it includes the majority of the works consulted by the present writer, and specifies those which, in his opinion, are most helpful to a right understanding of Rossetti's life and art.

F. R.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	2
I.....	4
EARLY YEARS.....	4
II.....	9
THE PRE-RAPHAELITE BROTHERHOOD.....	9
III.....	15
MISS SIDDAL AND RUSKIN.....	15
IV.....	21
OXFORD AND MARRIED LIFE.....	21
V.....	29
LATER YEARS.....	29
VI.....	39
CRITICISM AND APPRECIATION.....	39
INDEX.....	49

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI.....	1
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	3
THE BELOVED	
<i>Photograph: Mansell</i>	5
THE GIRLHOOD OF MARY VIRGIN.....	13
ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI.....	16
FOUND.....	18
MISS SIDDAL.....	19
PAOLO AND FRANCESCA.....	21
MARY AT THE DOOR OF SIMON.....	23
MARY AT THE DOOR OF SIMON.....	25
HOW THEY MET THEMSELVES.....	26
THE SALUTATION OF BEATRICE IN PARADISE.....	27
VENUS VERTICORDIA	
<i>Photograph: J. Caswall-Smith</i>	30
HAMLET AND OPHELIA.....	31
DANTE'S DREAM	
<i>Photograph; Mansell</i>	33
HEAD OF THE BLESSED DAMOZEL.....	34
BEATA BEATRIX.....	36
LUCREZIA BORGIA.....	38
. SYRIACA ASTARTE.....	40
THE LOVING CUP	
<i>Photograph: Mansell</i>	41
LADY LILITH.....	44
MRS. WILLIAM MORRIS.....	46
THE GATE OF MEMORY.....	48

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DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

I

EARLY YEARS

DISCONNECTED as they appear, far as they seem apart, the Battle of Waterloo and the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood are to each other distinctly related. Among the many far-reaching results of Wellington's victory was the restoration to the throne of Naples of the Bourbon King Ferdinand I, and if this change of government had no great lasting effect on the politics of Italy, it profoundly influenced the life and fortunes of one Italian, Gabriel Rossetti, father of our painter-poet. Though of exceedingly humble parentage, the youngest son of a blacksmith in the south of Italy, this Gabriel Rossetti was a man of considerable culture and intellect. He showed the germs of his son's versatility in art and letters, having a natural talent for drawing as well as writing. It was the last however, that he cultivated professionally, and early in life he made a local reputation as a poet. Settling at Naples, he became in turn librettist to the operatic theatre of San Carlo, curator of the museum in that city, and finally, having gained the friendship of Murat, a secretary in the Department of Public Instruction. It was this position that he held in 1815, being then thirty-two years of age, when his country was convulsed by the downfall of Napoleon. The Neapolitans did not take kindly to the new regime, and Gabriel Rossetti enrolled himself among the revolutionaries. After five years of strife and tumult Ferdinand suppressed constitutional government with Austrian bayonets, Rossetti was proscribed, and in 1821, disguised in a British uniform, he fled to Malta on board a man-of-war. Three years later he arrived in England, and at forty-one began his life anew as a teacher of Italian. In London he made the acquaintance of an Italian family, by name Polidori, living at 15 Park Village, East, Regent's Park.

Gaetano Polidori, son of a physician at Bientina in Italy and a former secretary to Alfieri, had come to England in 1789 and married an English governess. Mm Pierce. Drawn together by their common nationality, position, and tastes, both exiles, who had held positions of importance and were now reduced to earn a scanty livelihood by teaching their native language to foreigners, Rossetti speedily became intimate with Polidori and the other members of his household, with his children Henry and Charlotte — of whom we shall hear more as 'Uncle Henry' and 'Aunt Charlotte' — but especially with his daughter, Frances Mary Lavinia. They became engaged, and in 1826, two years after his arrival in England, Gabriel Rossetti married Miss Polidori, by whom he had four children.

Of this remarkable family the eldest was Maria Franceses, born in 1827, who, inheriting her mother's deeply religious nature, eventually entered an Anglican sisterhood. She died in 1876, and was the only one of the four to escape celebrity, though she too had her share of the family literary talent, and published in 1846 a little religious allegory entitled 'The Rivulets', also known as the 'Vision of Human Life'.

The second child, born at 38 Charlotte Street, Portland Place, on May 12, 1828, was Gabriel Charles Dante, later to become famous as DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI. The third was William Michael, born in 1829, still happily alive, and widely known as the assiduous biographer of his brother; while the youngest, born in 1830, was Christina, the gifted poetess.

Although Rossetti dropped his second name early in life, it is interesting to recall that he received this from his godfather and father's friend, Mr. Charles Lyell of Kinnordy, a student of Italian literature and father of the celebrated geologist, Sir Charles Lyell. The transposition of his other two, 'Gabriel Dante' into 'Dante Gabriel', was made about the close of 1848; at all events, in September of that year we find him signing himself, as customary hitherto, 'G. C. Rossetti' in a letter to his mother, while the next month (November) he signs a letter to his brother 'Gabriel Dante Rossetti', which he changes the following year (1849) to 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti', and this henceforward is his usual signature. It has been suggested that this change was made to remove possible confusions between father and son, but, plausible though it sounds, the explanation is far from convincing. Rossetti was never called 'Dante'; to his friends and relatives he was always 'Gabriel,' and changes of name to avoid confusion in a family are generally begun at home. In no letter previous to September, 1848, does Dante appear in his signature, whereas Charles does almost invariably. Then suddenly it disappears altogether, and Dante is given the first place. In the absence of any official explanation, it seems more likely that the change was made purely to please the owner. At that time he was emerging from the student stage to take up his professional career as a painter; renewed study of his father's favourite poet — whom he 'rediscovered' for himself¹ — had taught him to appreciate more keenly the dignity of the name he bore. Is it improbable to suppose that the rearrangement of names is his acknowledgment of the fact? A passage from the preface to 'Early Italian Poets' seems to bear out this hypothesis. 'In those early days', he says, 'all around me partook of the influence of the great Florentine; till, from viewing it as a natural element, I also, growing older, was drawn within the circle'. Of what is Rossetti speaking here if not of the transition from unquestioning acceptance to conscious enthusiasm? And is not this the moment when he would remember that he too had the right to bear this glorious name, and forthwith make of it his oriflamme?

Of Rossetti's school life there is little to tell. His father since 1831 had been professor of Italian at King's College, London,

¹ 'No doubt our father's Dantesque studies saturated the household air with wafts and rumours of the mighty Alighieri, therefore the child breathed Dante (so to speak), but he did not think Dante, nor lay him to heart. On the contrary, our father's speculations and talk about Dante — which, although he highly valued the poetry as such, all took an abstruse or theoretic turn — rather alienated my brother than otherwise, and withheld him from "looking up" the Florentine, to see whether his poems were things readable, like those of Shake-spear, Scott, or Goethe, With all of us children the case was the same. I question whether my brother had ever read twenty consecutive lines of Dante until he was some fifteen or sixteen years of age; no doubt after that he rapidly made up for lost time.' — W. M. Rossetti. "Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir"

EARLY YEARS

and thereby entitled to send one son to the day school there free of charge, and a second at reduced fees. To King's College School, then, after a year at a preparatory school near Portland Place, went the two young Rossettis in the autumn of 1837. Dante Gabriel is said to have shown some aptitude for languages, especially French and Latin, but a profound dislike for scientific and mathematical studies. It is curious that his drawing master there was no less a person than John Sell Cotman, who does not appear, however, to have discerned any remarkable promise in his pupil. That Rossetti made no special friends here may be traced to his sensitiveness and natural reserve, rather than to any real lack of sociability. On his own confession he 'shrank' from the amusements of his schoolfellows — for sport and games he never showed the slightest interest — and we may imagine him a bookish boy, reticent except to his home-circle, preoccupied even then with his own dreams, already a poet and illustrator in his childish way, and with his heart set on these things instead of cricket and football.

Far more congenial to him was his home-life, of which he has left several vivid little word-pictures scattered among his writings. The loneliness and straitened circumstances of the family only served to draw its members closer together, and if the Rossettis at that time had few English acquaintances, no Italian seemed to have passed through London without coming to see them. Mazzini and Pagannini were among those who came to Charlotte Street, but the old patriot welcomed his countrymen whatever their rank in life, and organ-grinders and hawkers of plaster images met with no less kind or courteous a reception. Of the evenings when there were no visitors, Rossetti bequeathes us a delightful reminiscence in his story, 'Saint Agnes of Intercession'.

" Among my earliest recollections', he writes, 'none is stronger than that of my father standing before the fire when he came home in the London winter evenings, and singing to us in his sweet, generous tones: sometimes ancient English ditties — such songs as one might translate from the birds, and the brooks might set to music; sometimes those with which foreign travel had familiarised his youth — among them the great tunes which have rung the world's changes since '89. I used to sit on the hearthrug listening to him, and look between his knees into the fire till it burned my face, while the sights swarming up in it seemed changed and changed with the music, till the music and the fire and my heart burned together, and I would take paper and pencil and try in some childish way to fix the shapes that rose within me. For my hope, even then, was to be a painter".

The hope was not belied. Indeed, there never seems to have been any question from the first as to his profession, though his childish drawings held forth no prodigious promise. So in 1842, when he had just turned fourteen, Dante Gabriel was duly entered as an art student at the academy of Mr. S. F. Cary — a son of the translator of 'Dante' — in Bloomsbury Street. Already he had been amusing himself by drawing illustrations for Shakespeare's plays, and for Scott's poems and romances, and in the February of this year he sent his Aunt Charlotte a dozen drawings to sell at a bazaar in which the Countess of Wicklow, to whose family she was governess, was interested. The drawings, about half of which were originals, being duly received and admired, in the following June, Gabriel, like a dutiful nephew, sends his aunt a drawing illustrating Scott's 'Cavalier', and in a post script begs her to note that 'the figure is *entirely original*,' underlined. As confirming the child's paternity of the man, it is interesting to note this early tendency to create instead of copying, this preference to illustrate some scene or character from literature before the rendering of nature and things seen.



THE BELOVED

During his four years' attendance at Mr. Cary's academy, Gabriel, it is to be feared, was by no means a diligent student. His