

The Italian Heritage in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti

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In an early study of Christina Rossetti published in 1897, Mackenzie Bell, a good friend of the Rossettis, states that "It is not possible to accentuate overmuch the influence on Christina Rossetti of her Italian lineage, her early surroundings, and the fact that . . . her mind was steeped with Italian literature".¹ Thus from very early on, the Italian heritage has always been acknowledged. Yet it has received hardly any close study, even in recent years, when we have seen considerable critical attention devoted to Christina Rossetti. The "lineage" derives partly from her mother Frances Polidori, who was half Italian, and mainly from her father, Gabriele Rossetti, the exile from the kingdom of Naples whose adventurous escape from political persecution saw him find sanctuary first in Malta before her moved on to England. He is still famous, or notorious, for his works on Dante.

Christina Rossetti's indebtedness to her father is an area which could be the topic of an article, but not this one. I shall, however, here and there refer to such indebtedness. In fact, when I speak of Italian heritage I refer in particular to the legacy left by the Rossetti's

1. Henry Thomas Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study*, London, 1898, 319.

father: first, the Italian language, and secondly, Italian literature, in particular a knowledge and great interest in Dante. The children all spoke English with their mother, but Italian with their father. That the Italian language is an important part of the heritage of the young Rossettis is clear. It gave special status to all four – Dante Gabriel, Maria, William Michael and Christina – enabling them to translate, use, and discuss writers such as Dante and Petrarch with a special authority. As far as Christina Rossetti is concerned, it is not generally known that she wrote about 50 poems in Italian; nor that she read in manuscript and corrected Charles Cayley's translation of the *Divine Comedy*, published in 1851.

William Michael Rossetti has left to us vivid vignettes of his family, the children listening to the endless political discussions of the Italian exiles gathered around their father:

My mind's eye presents a curious group, although it seemed natural enough at the time. My father and three or four foreigners engaged in animated talk on the affairs of Europe, from the point of view of patriotic aspiration, . . . with frequent and fervent recitations of poetry intervening;²

This recurrent family activity must have had a remarkable effect on the children; but in spite of the affectionate tone with which William Michael describes in retrospect this childhood memory, we know that the father was a crippling and feared presence in many ways. His sometimes fantastic work on Dante had supporters, but much more numerous were its critics, who disgraced him and covered his work in ridicule. Umberto Eco has recently looked at the material, and in an article published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1990, Eco has shown how, indeed, Rossetti twisted the evidence from the text of the *Commedia* to fit his theory, and he states that Rossetti faked footnotes. In any case, the financial difficulties and the disgrace which crushed him as a result of all this must have been very heavy to bear. Some of the young Rossettis seem to have tried to exorcise their father's shadow, after his death, by producing their own work on Dante and, in the case of both

2. William Michael Rossetti, Introduction to *The Pre-Raphaelite Diaries and Letters*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, 3 vols, Farnborough, 1971, Vol. I, pp. 54–55.

Maria and William Michael, dedicating their works to him. Christina Rossetti is a very different case: all of her books but two were dedicated to her mother. Also, Rossetti kept a collection of 21 poems in Italian entitled *Il Rosseggiar dell'Oriente* in the secrecy of her desk, and it was published in *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti* by William Michael only after her death (in fact, in 1904); Dolores Rosenblum remarks on this that it is an indication of the fact that Rossetti "wanted to be known unequivocally as an English poet".³

In the light of this ambivalent position of closeness and distance from her father and her Italian heritage, what place does Italy and the Italian language and literature adopt in Christina Rossetti's work?

Italian critics have been very scathing of Rossetti's poetry in Italian. In a study published in 1983, Pasquale Maffeo translates into Italian a number of English poems by Rossetti, producing a very interesting version; he seems less sensitive, however, to the nature of her Italian poetry of which he states, in his introduction, that "la dizione risulta tutta d'imprestito, desunta da sedimenti di letture, inerte nei calchi che mal si piegano alle flessioni del passo sintattico che invece la vuole fresca e cedevole, viva carne su classiche giunture".⁴ The fact that maybe Rossetti did not want to write poetry which was "fresh and pliant, live flesh on classical sinews" seems not to have occurred to the critic. He also mentions as a criticism the fact that the title *Il Rosseggiar dell'Oriente* "would not have displeased Carducci" ("non sarebbe spiaciuto al Carducci", p. 15) – yes, currently Carducci's poetry is not our taste, but it was held in high esteem in the 1860s – in fact, even in the early 1960s – so that to compare Christina poetry to Carducci should be a compliment. He further quotes from a critic who had published an article in the magazine *Il Marzocco* under the pseudonym of Th. Neal writing in similar terms of Christina Rossetti's Italian poetry, and who had also stated: "One would think that the Author of these lines did not speak the language of her father, whereas we know that she did" ["Quasi si potrebbe pensare che l'autrice di questi versi non abbia parlato la lingua paterna, come invece sappiamo

3. *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Ill., 1986, 51.

4. *Il Tempo e l'Eterno*, trans., introd. and notes by Pasquale Maffeo, Chieti, 1983, p. 14.

che fece”]. The point I would like to establish here is precisely the nature of this “lingua paterna” which influenced Rossetti – this father tongue: What were the snatches of poetry which William Michael mentions? Well, they were likely to be mainly patriotic songs for which Gabriele Pasquale Rossetti was famous throughout Italy and even in England, an example being a song which begins

Sei pur bella cogli astri sul crine
Che scintillan qual vivi zaffiri.⁵

Other works of Gabriele in poetry in the first years of his exile were libretti for Italian operas, which titles such as *La Schiava in Bagdad*, *Il Corsaro*, or *Medora e Corrado*, *cantata melodrammatica basata sul Corsaro di Byron*; the diction was verbose, operatic, histrionic. But his example for lyric poetry was Metastasio, who was also read by Christina Rossetti in her childhood. There is some indebtedness to Metastasio in her rhythms, as I have shown in a previous article of mine; but her diction is far more clipped and contracted than what I have read from her father’s, and her lines scan with great variety. Does Italian and Italy then belong to Christina’s childhood, to her father’s circle and her own early readings? And are they in later life a source of images to support more or less nostalgic references or a looking back to the past? This is what Jan Marsh has stated about Christina’s use of Italy as a place. Italy is “symbolic of the sweet security of infancy”;⁶ place, that is, assumes the function of a symbol, and its significance is determined by its chronological position in the life of the poet. This is probably partly true; but I would argue that Italy is, rather, in Christina’s own words in a poem, “the country half my own” throughout Christina’s life.

In the English poems written about Italy on the occasion of Christina Rossetti’s only visit to Italy, this country becomes “sisterland of Paradise” (“En Route”); it is the land “blessed” because it “warms [my] heart”, and when “our swallows fly back to . . . the sweet south”. This south is not so much one’s lost childhood, or a

5. Quoted in Felicita Jurlano, *Christina Georgina Rossetti: The True Story*, n.p., n.d. [after 1978], p. 15). Jurlano further states that such a song “was known also to the English admirers of Italian letters.”

6. Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography*, London, 1994, p. 339.

lost Eden, as a figure of a Paradise – but a Paradise which exists, a place which one can long for, now; it simply “lies out of reach”. England, on the other hand, is “the North/where I was born, bred, look to die”: the difference between these two poles, the South and the North, becomes an opposition between a near-paradisaal state and the location of everyday, real life. England is the place where the persona has to come back “to do my day’s work in its day” (*Italia, Io Ti Saluto*) – the contingent world, the here and now.⁷

As for the idea of Englishness we see that in the poem entitled “*Enrica*” the persona creates an opposition between Englishwomen, whose appearance is “trim, correct” and whose spirit is “deep at our deepest, strong and free”, and the Italian lady *Enrica*, who is “less trammelled by lore of school” and “courteous by nature, not by rule”. But we also come to discover that the opposition is only a matter of surface, for *Enrica* is “warm-hearted and of cordial face”, and the Englishwomen are “warm-hearted but of semblance cold”.

Rather than a biographical identity displaced and distanced in time, relegated to her childhood, I argue for an Italian identity displaced in terms of location within the self. The mass of her poetry suggests that Christina saw such an Italian identity, or an Italian identity as image or symbol in poetry, to reside precisely in that deepest core of one’s self – in what Christina almost obsessively in her Italian poetry called her “*cuore*” – the heart. This already appears in her English poems. In one, addressing Italy she says “Take my heart . . . Dear land, take my tears”; but this is even more clear in her Italian poems in which the heart is the central, most recurring image.

In the Italian poetry (and here I have to rely on what I have argued and shown in my previous article)⁸ this image can refer at one and the same time to her inner self, to her beloved, and to Christ’s love – a kind of trinity, three separate figures which co-exist and become merged in the image of the heart. Also, the “*cuore*”

7. For the text of all the poems quoted I rely on *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R.W. Crump, 3 vols, Baton Rouge and London, 1979–1990.

8. Valeria Tinkler-Villani, “Christina Rossetti’s Italian Poems”, in *Beauty and the Beast: Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, R.L. Stevenson and their Contemporaries*, eds. Peter Liebrechts and Wim Tigges, Amsterdam and Atlanta, 1996.

becomes the location, the stage on which the drama of the persona's secular and religious attachments are played out one against the other. The heart of the poetry, the core of the poetry, is "Cor Mio".

Also at the heart of her poetry we find a figure whose pervasive presence must be partly due to her father's studies – the figure of Dante. Again it is one of her Italian poems that gives us a clue as to her relationship to Dante's poetry:

Cor mio a cui si volge l'altro mio core
 Qual calamita al polo, e non ti trova,
 La nascita della mia vita nuova
 Con pianto fu, con grida e con dolore.

[My heart, to which my other heart turns
 Like magnet to the pole, and does not find you
 The birth of my new life
 Was with weeping, with cries and with pain.]
 (poem 19 of *Il Rosseggiar*, "Amico e più che amico
 mio")

The almost recondite meaning of the two hearts in line one is further complicated by the quasi-metaphysical image of the magnet and the pole, which is in turn undermined by the impossible event of a magnet turning to a pole and not finding it. In this universe bereft of any fixed point, lacking any North or South, Rossetti's persona compares the first inception of her *Vita Nuova* with that of Dante. In that work, Dante described his persona as experiencing plenty of weeping (see Chapter XXXI of the *Vita Nuova*) and plenty of pain – even physical pain (see chapter XXIII). But these are later moments; the beginning of the *Vita Nuova*, the first apparition of Beatrice, filled Dante with bliss: "*Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra*", we read in section II.⁹ After all, that is the very meaning of Beatrice's name, as Dante Gabriel stressed in his translation: Beatrice is the bringer of beatitude.¹⁰ These lines also support my view of the

9. "Now your source of joy has been revealed", *Dante: la Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds, Penguin, 1969, rpt 1978, p. 30.

10. This is true, however, of religious beatitude, for in worldly and physical terms Dante's *Vita Nuova* began in joy, and continued in grief. Rossetti inverts this course; in the poem just quoted, the persona goes on to say:

closeness of Christina Rossetti's poetry to that of Dante's early work. In section III of Dante's *Vita Nuova* the narrator is granted a vision; he sees the God of Love, and he is holding in one hand the beloved, and in the other hand an object:

And he who held her held also in his hand a thing that was burning
in flames; and he said to me, *Vide cor tuum*.¹¹

It was probably from Dante's *Vita Nuova* that Rossetti drew some of her images, such as the image of the heart as separate from her body, as well as the complicated manner in which this image is combined with that of the beloved and of God. That trinity I mentioned is taken directly from the *Vita Nuova*.

But Rossetti puts those images to a very different use from Dante's. In Rossetti's Italian poetry her beloved is not the bringer of beatitude, as Beatrice was. Rather than depend on her beloved for taking her, through love, to a heavenly vision in the platonic system Dante and other poets adapted to the medieval convention of love poetry, it is the speaker of the poems herself that will guide the male beloved to Christ and God. Rossetti's Italian sequence, what Maffeo calls her "canzoniere minimo", thus inverts the roles of the conventional medieval course of secular to divine love.

It is with these clues concerning Dante's *Vita Nuova* and concerning Italy drawn from Italian poems and poems about Italy that I want to approach a final text of Rossetti's – her sonnet sequence bearing an Italian title – *Monna Innominata*.

This title refers first to the many "unnamed ladies" who came before Beatrice and Laura, and who were sung by "a school of less conspicuous poets" than Petrarch and Dante, but in a similar manner. It also refers to the unnamed lady who is imagined to be the writer of the sequence of sonnets in front of us. It is a sequence of 14 sonnets. Much research, scholarship and critical attention has been devoted to this sequence in recent years, and, with varying emphases

Ma l'aspro duolo fummi precursore
Di speranza gentil . . .

[But the harsh pain was the forerunner
of sweet hope . . .]

11. La *Vita Nuova*, trans. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, London, 1910, p. 28.

and from different angles, most critics agree that what Rossetti is doing is setting up a critique of the love conventions as developed by Dante and Petrarch. As Anthony Harrison puts it, in *Monna Innominata*

Rossetti . . . subverts the post-Dantean values and expectations of her genre while defiantly resisting the conventional role of silent object and overturning the gender relations usually accepted in Petrarchan sonnet sequences.¹²

I agree with this critic, and with other critics who all insist on Rossetti's subversion of the expectations of desire created by the love-lyric and even by Dante's vision of Beatrice. But this is only part of the story. To this, I would like to add two further points. The first is a general point: that it was in her Italian poems that Christina Rossetti developed the strategies and the very ideas connected with such subversion. The second point is specifically concerned with the *Monna Innominata* sequence, and that is that the Italian title should alert the reader to the various and crucial roles played by the use of the Italian language within the subversive tendencies of the sequence.

An integral part of this sequence, I would argue, are the preface, and the epigrams. Rossetti herself refused permission to print only part of this sequence in an American anthology,¹³ and I find it very strange that in his Italian translation of the sequence Maffeo should have left out both the preface and the epigrams. The latter – the epigrams – are probably the aspect of the sequence which first catches our eye. Each sonnet has one epigram from Dante, and one from Petrarch. There have been studies on the epigrams. William Whitla has focused on the contents of the epigrams, and has produced a very scholarly analysis of provenance, links, possible interpretations and various other aspects of the epigrams, and I am convinced that even the most complicated inter-linking patterns he suggests were, indeed, intended by the Author.¹⁴ But it seems strange no-one should have mentioned the simple fact that they are in Italian.

12. See in particular the chapter entitled "Intertextually: Dante, Petrarch and Christina Rossetti", in Anthony Harrison, *Christina Rossetti In Context*, Brighton, 1988, p. 155.

13. See *The Rossetti-MacMillan Letters*, ed. Lona Mosk Packer, Berkeley, 1963, p. 154.

14. "Questioning the Convention: Monna Innominata", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent, Ithaca and London, 1987. •

Now clearly most epigrams originally written in a language different from that of the text itself were kept, in the nineteenth century, in the original language. But the case is slightly different here. For each sonnet of 14 lines is prefaced by 2 lines in Italian – this creates a contrast, a continuous shifting of mediums. We cannot avoid seeing even with our naked eye that what is going on is a dialogue between the speaker of the sonnets – a woman speaking/writing in English (and I say writing because it is clear the speaker is the writer of the poetry), and Dante and Petrarca, writing their poetry, in Italian.

This is not dissimilar to a strategy Dante used in the *Vita Nuova*. This was one of the very first works written in the vernacular, also thanks to the encouragement of Guido Cavalcanti. Early in this work the narrator sees the God of Love who speaks to the lover first in Latin, then in the vernacular; as Charles Singleton says,

The shift from Latin to the vernacular on the part of the God of Love when he utters these last words is in itself a part of the total revelation made by the vision. For only the words in Latin are of the nature of an oracle, and by being put in that language they are set apart and raised to a proper dignity. When Love changes to Italian one feels that somehow he has stepped down to the level of the poet and of everyday affairs. Thus, like the number nine, the Latin too is a sign.¹⁵

Similarly, the continuous shifting from Italian into English is a stepping down from the high medieval Love convention of Dante and Petrarca to the level of the possibilities of love in the nineteenth century, in England. The shift of language is a “a sign”.

Another such sign is the repetition of the naming of Dante and Petrarca. this is an almost incantatory repetition which also acts as an instrument of meaning. For, in opposition to the title and the poets it refers to, Dante and Petrarca are two poets “continuamente nominati”, and therefore set up a contrast with the present-day, English world of the unnamed lady writer.

The Italian title attracts our attention to naming and non naming as a sign. Dante and Petrarch are continuously named in the

15. Charles Singleton, *An Essay on the Vita Nuova*, Baltimore and London, 1949, rpt. 1977, p. 17.

epigrams; Laura and Beatrice are named both at the very first words, and in the very last words of the preface. What we are told in the preface is that these women have become unreal and impersonal, and what we understand is that this happens in spite of the fact that we know their names. This is the paradox of Beatrice and Laura. Because they have "world-wide fame", they do not fully exist in a real place and a specific time – in Italy in the late middle ages – but merely, as the preface puts it, "in that land, and in that period". A number of critics have puzzled on this unnecessarily cryptic phrase, but it is, I would say, part of Rossetti's system of signs here. It reasserts the opposition between the revered convention and present-day England. Rossetti is using the idea of Italy here in a manner similar to the way she had used it in the poetry: opposed to the idealized, generalized world of Dante and Petrarch, England is "our day's work in its day", the here and now, the real, contingent world.

The preface closes on a cryptic reference to "The Great Poetess", who also remains unnamed, although since we are told she is the Author of sonnets from the Portuguese, we know her to be Barrett Browning. One of the purposes of this reference, I would say, is to add to the themes of love and honour, specifically mentioned in the preface, the idea of marriage – and these have been defined as the three central concerns of the late Victorians. Moreover, it gives Rossetti a chance to stress the importance of real circumstances in writing love sonnets – that is, the fact that Barrett Browning is writing out of her love for her husband, and out of her happiness. In doing this, Rossetti is doing in terms of the England of the nineteenth century, precisely what Dante had done with the *Vita Nuova*: for there Dante himself tried, as Barbara Reynolds puts it, to "depart from or extend the conventions":

It was in the gradually increasing admittance of reality into the enclosed garden of poetic convention that Dante made his most original and creative discoveries.¹⁶

16. Introduction to Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, trans. Barbara Reynolds, Penguin, 1969 rpt. 1978, pp. 16, 17.

Dante managed to break with the static, idealised earlier medieval poetic conventions, and create love poetry which seemed drawn directly from personal experience. By stressing the importance of drawing "not from fancy but from feeling", and by using all the other signs I have mentioned, based on her use of Italian, Rossetti felt, I would argue, that she was attempting to do the same for England and for her own day.

As some critics have pointed out, Rossetti's "monna innominata" sings of a male beloved who remains totally unnamed and indeed quite undescribed; he is all but absent, and is not the source of inspiration. She sings of moments in a love story analogous to the moments in the conventional, medieval love story, but experienced in a very different way; for example, where Dante and Petrarch celebrated the first sight of the beloved, her first word, her first greeting, Rossetti's second sonnet is dedicated to the regret that the persona cannot remember a single thing of such a first encounter. Moreover, the sonnet sequence moves steadily in time to portray the lover in her old age – and, instead of being the beginning of a career of poetry, as Beatrice had started Dante off in the *Vita Nuova* enabling him to move to the *Commedia*, "monna innominata"'s love ends in silence. The final words of the sequence are "Silence of love that cannot sing again".

But I would argue that though she might be subverting the nature of Dante's conventions, she is performing exactly the same function for her own day, and using the very same techniques. Rossetti sings of a love story which is more true to the experience of a woman in nineteenth-century England; she re-writes Dante's and Petrarch's conventional love story and makes it new.

The medieval convention of love poetry was surely one of the poetic traditions which the late nineteenth century most worried about. It formed the touchstone against which not only the Pre-Raphaelites, but other poets such as Tennyson and Swinburne measured the present, and such poets became deeply involved in exploring its validity in their day; what Rossetti does, therefore, goes straight to the heart of the poetic issues of her time. It is in her Italian poetry, and through her use of Dante that she develops the strategies to do this.