



THE NEW LIFE
DANTE

TRANSLATED BY
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

PREFACE BY
MICHAEL PALMER

THE NEW LIFE

DANTE ALIGHIERI

Translated and with an Introduction by
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

Preface by
MICHAEL PALMER

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



New York

P R E F A C E

A CURIOUS thought, in retrospect: that a medieval Tuscan poet, Dante Alighieri, would emerge as a figure central to early-twentieth-century Modernism in its broadest reaches and to much of the literature that followed. It seems equally odd that the first complete translation of the *Commedia* into English did not appear until 1802, and that the first of demonstrable value, by the Anglican cleric H. F. Cary, would not arrive until 1814, some five hundred years after Dante's death. The profound appeal of his work to the poets of the Romantic movement would be magnified among their true heirs, the innovative practitioners of Modernism. While writers including Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, Eliot and Pound (as well as many African-American writers, such as Tolson, Baraka, and Naylor) were to focus centrally on the *Commedia* itself, the quieter influence of the earlier *Vita Nuova* and the lyrics of Dante's contemporaries, the *stilnovisti*, should not be underestimated at a time when poets were looking to break free from the hothouse of neoromantic ornament that late Victorian poetry was perceived, justly or not, to have become. The *Vita Nuova's* echoic presence can also be felt in the prose of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*

as a *Young Man*, particularly in Stephen Dedalus's moments of epiphany and erotic revelation. In addition, as Rossetti himself recognized in the modest introduction to his translation, and as Eliot would later emphasize, the *Vita Nuova* represents a key to a larger understanding of the trilogy that would follow and finally be completed late in the long years of exile from Dante's native Florence.¹

It is generally agreed that the *Vita Nuova* was composed sometime between 1292 and 1295. Dante would have been twenty-seven to thirty years old. (The opening scene of the *Inferno* unfolds during his thirty-third year.) On the surface, it appears to be a simple-enough work, a selection of thirty-one poems from Dante's early years, along with narrative framing devices and rather scholastic prose commentaries (Rossetti left the latter for his brother, William, to translate). It would be a book of the "new life" engendered by his first revelatory encounter with Beatrice Portinari at the age (symbolic or otherwise) of nine, a book of beginnings, dedicated to his fellow Florentine and erstwhile mentor, the masterful lyric poet Guido Cavalcanti.

Yet, given the voracious scholarly curiosity about Dante's life, as well as the work's evident prefiguration of the *Commedia*, the "story" has come to be viewed in many, sometimes conflicting, lights. By juxtaposing prose narrative with lyric, Dante in effect narratizes his

1. See T. S. Eliot, "The *Vita Nuova*," in *Dante* (Faber and Faber, 1965).

lyric impulse, in anticipation of the crossing of lyric, dramatic, and narrative voicings in the epochal poem to follow. Furthermore, by adding an element of poetic obliquity to the prose commentaries, he lends them a nonlinear dimension that renders them susceptible to multiple interpretations. Mention must also be made of the striking and strategic discrepancies, at points, between poem and commentary. Dante very characteristically complicates the plot while attempting to fashion a poetics that would eventually engage fully with medieval and classical philosophy, and that would include history. So it is that his *libello*, his little “book of my memory,” can be seen to open in many directions and to be open to many possible readings. Hidden in plain sight, a secondary drama occurs between the musical logic of lyric and the linear argument of prose. It is as if the rather ephemeral body of Beatrice, of the living Beatrice and the dead and the dreamed, were enfolded within layers of text of varying hues and degrees of opacity.

Is the *Vita Nuova* the book of Beatrice, the book of love, the book of memory, an allegorical autobiography, an occulted, theological conversion tale, a treatise on poetics, even a kabbalistic inscription of the revealed truth in life’s events? The arguments would seem to miss the central point of Dante’s evolving vision of *harmonia* and grace. The gradual overcoming of a Cavalcantian poetics of tumultuous personal psychology creates a path toward a new comprehension of self and other, and the material

and the metaphysical. A vision of grace through higher love displaces one of relentlessly dark entanglements terminating in loss. The new poetics *is* the new life. It is precisely within the body of the poem, a poem metamorphosing from the struggles of youthful erotic fantasy and disappointment into an evolved, spiritualized sense of desire, that the vision is realized, and that the concepts both of memory and of the biographical self are recast. Here dream and waking interpenetrate to create a new mode of understanding, and here too the play of intuition and judgment, moment and duration, reveal the strangeness of lyric to itself, as well as its hidden, dialogic nature. The *Vita Nuova* then can be seen as the first book in Dante's lifelong project of self-commentary and self-overcoming, a beginning. Yet as such it also represents an ending to that very poetics of his youth that first gave him the possibility of the "new life." Dante announces that, after the final sonnet, "*una mirabile visione*" appeared to him. He had at that time resolved to say no more of Beatrice until he learned to write of her in a worthier manner.

What Rossetti might have thought of all the scholarly *combattimenti*, it is difficult to say. By explicitly disclaiming any personal scholarship in his introduction, he allows himself to focus on the mainly poetic issues that the act of translating this "book of youth" evokes. The *Vita Nuova* translation appears in 1861 in a very particular context, that of Rossetti's *Early Italian Poets*. The book, Rossetti's first, is divided into two parts, "Poets Chiefly Before Dante," and "Dante and His Circle." *The*

New Life was originally printed in the latter. Amid such company, Rossetti's version of the *Vita Nuova* can be seen as part of an act of transhistorical aesthetic redemption, one that would draw an implicit parallel with the artistic aspirations of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The work would have a profound effect on Ezra Pound and, indirectly through Pound (even as Rossetti's reputation went into partial eclipse), on the theory and practice of translation in the twentieth century.² The influence on Pound, and on Modernism, had two dimensions. The first of these consisted of the attention drawn to the Tuscan poets themselves, and through them to the early vernacular tradition of Europe, the Sicilian School at the court of Frederick II in Palermo (where the sonnet is said to have been born), as well as, crucially, the troubadours and *trobairitz* of Provence, from whom the Sicilian School derived. Understanding of what constituted the lyric tradition, and cultural transmission, was thus significantly, if gradually, altered and enhanced.

The second determinative influence on Pound concerned the approach to translation itself. Rossetti's skilled deployment of metrical equivalents to evoke, rather than mimic, the Italian, and his unforced handling of those meters, would forever mark Pound's Italian translations. Particularly in his early efforts, Pound would also borrow

2. I refer the reader to Jerome McGann's excellent, detailed analysis of Rossetti's Italian translations (in the *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, Vol. 9, Spring 2000, pp. 25–39), to which I am indebted here.

heavily from what we might call Rossetti's personal style of translation, including the, to our ears, somewhat precious use of archaisms and occasional other mannered effects. It is Rossetti's philosophy of translation, however, that would most affect not only Pound but through him countless others in the succeeding century. He summarizes this philosophy in the preface to *Early Italian Poets*:

The life-blood of rhymed translation is this,—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty. Poetry not being an exact science, literalness of rendering is altogether secondary to his chief aim. I say *literalness*,—not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing. When literalness can be combined with what is thus the primary condition of success, the translator is fortunate, and must strive his utmost to unite them; when such object can only be attained by paraphrase, that is his only path.³

For Rossetti, in other words, translation is an essentially poetic activity bound to a program of cultural renewal.

We have at our disposal several highly useful and skilled versions of the *Vita Nuova* in English. Some

3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Writings*, edited by Jan Marsh (New Amsterdam Books, 2000).

certainly take fewer liberties with Dante's text. None, however, bear the historical and poetic resonance of Rossetti's, which must qualify, in itself, as a significant literary document of its time.

With the *Vita Nuova*, Dante offers us his particular, invaluable *gradus ad Parnassum*, a journey from the circumscribed consciousness of the early lyrics, still heavily inflected by the voices of Cavalcanti, Guido Guinizzelli, and others, to the great poems of first, full maturity (such as the canzone "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore" in the nineteenth section, which will be recalled in *Purgatorio* 24 as the definitive source of the "new rhymes"). Inseparable from this poetic journey is the altered sense of person and of calling that the death of Beatrice will occasion. The lyric will no longer be predominantly the medium of familiar, confessional complaint about personal despair and the pains of longing and unfulfillment, but rather the site for a radical transfiguration of both self and other, as well as a transformed conception of love and its language.

—MICHAEL PALMER

This is a New York Review Book
Published by The New York Review of Books
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

Preface copyright © 2002 by Michael Palmer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321.

[Vita nuova. English]

The new life / Dante Alighieri ; translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti ;
introduction by Michael Palmer.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-940322-87-0 (Hardcover) — ISBN 1-59017-011-3 (Paperback)

I. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 1828–1882. II. Title.

PQ4315.58 .R7 2002

851'.1—dc21

2001006228

ISBN 0-940322-15-3

Cover illustration: The Master of the Triumph of Death, *The Triumph of Death*
(detail), c. 1450. Palazzo Abatellis, Sicily. Courtesy of FMR/Spata & Zucchero
Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

February 2002

www.nybooks.com