

GABRIELE ROSSETTI: "ON THY BOWED HEAD,
MY FATHER, FEEL THE NIGHT"

The figure of Gabriele Rossetti is seen flitting with increasing frequency through the contemporary criticism of Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti, but the contours are always vague and the apparition travels with the transient phosphorescence of a will-o'-the-wisp. Efforts made to describe it have been, at best, oblique. For example, David G. Riede tentatively defines it in relation to "Dante's scholasticism," telling us that Dante Gabriel "was, after all, raised in a household where Dante's scholasticism was under constant scrutiny."¹ Commenting laconically on Filippo Pistrucchi's *Iconologia*, Richard Hurst's translation of Gombauld's *Endimion*, and the Aldine edition of Colonna's *Hyperotomachia*, D. M. R. Bentley provides this glimpse: "These were among the 'libro sommamente mistico' ('supremely mystical books' [sic]) in his father's library which, as William Michael recalls (*Memoir*, p. 62), the young Rossetti 'inspected from time to time, with some gusto not unmingled with awe.'"² Concerning Dante Gabriel's *The Early Italian Poets*, Barbara Munson Goff writes: "Rossetti's father had devoted his expatriate life in London to the arcanest sorts of scholarship, mainly to prove his thesis that the *stilnovisti*, Boccaccio, even Chaucer, formed a Freemason underground."³ Discussing two of Christina's poems, Eugene Zasadinski alludes casually to "the purely nominal Anglicanism of the poet's father."⁴ In what follows, biographical data⁵ and critical axioms pertaining to Gabriele Rossetti will be presented, developed, and explored in order to make him come alive for the modern reader as part of the human dimension to the Rossetti phenomenon in English art and letters, with particular reference to Dante Gabriel's sonnet, "Dantis Tenebrae, In Memory of my Father." Some corroboratory attention will be devoted to the problem of his "massoneria" (Freemasonry).⁶

Gabriele Rossetti was born February 28, 1783 in Vasto, Abruzzo Citeriore, Italy. He was by birth abruzzese, not napoletano as is commonly supposed.⁷ His father, the blacksmith Nicola Rossetti, traced the family's lineage to the noble house of the della Guardias, whose coat of arms bore the image of a robust tree and the motto, "Frangas, non flectas". According to Gabriele, the name "Rossetti" ("Reddish") was at first a sobriquet directed to several members of the family who had ruddy complexions and reddish hair.

By far the youngest of four brothers, Gabriele, his father's "Benjamin,"⁸ evinced talent in versifying and draughtsmanship at an early age. The eldest brother, Andrea, became canon of Vasto. Antonio, a versifying barber ("barbitonsor, frisore," as he orotundly described