

# A Vision of Beatrice: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the *Beata Beatrix*

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was entranced with the theme of love. It was the dominant subject in his poetry and painting, and it colored his interpretation of literature. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his attitude towards the works of Dante Alighieri. Rossetti's translations of the Florentine poet, as well as his paintings based on subjects from Dante, all express the idea that romantic love is the equivalent of spiritual salvation.<sup>1</sup>

The supreme example of Rossetti's personal interpretation of Dante is the painting *Beata Beatrix*. It was begun as a tribute to his wife who died by her own hand in 1862.<sup>2</sup> *Beata Beatrix* is the most compelling of all his works in its autobiographical association; it also marks the attainment of his own theoretical standards. The history of this painting (in the Tate Gallery and a replica of it in the Art Institute of Chicago) reveals the depth of Rossetti's identification with Dante and the inevitable failure of his Dantean dream.

Rossetti's familiarity with Dante can be traced to his childhood. His father, Gabriele Pasquale Rossetti—an expatriate *Abruzzese*—was a Dante scholar who sought to discover hidden meanings in the work of the medieval poet.<sup>3</sup> When his first son was born in 1828, he named him Charles Gabriel Dante, honoring the infant's godfather Charles Lyell, a translator of Dante, as well as the object of his studies. By 1848, the youth dropped the name Charles, and signed his correspondence Gabriel Dante. In the following year, he became Dante Gabriel, giving primary significance to the name he deemed most important.

The artist's brother William has recorded that, as a youth, Rossetti betrayed little interest in Dante:

*It has often been said by writers who know nothing very definite about the matter that Dante Rossetti was, from childhood or early boyhood, a devoted admirer of the stupendous poet after whom*

*he was christened. This is a mistake. No doubt our father's Dantesque studies saturated the household with wafts and rumours of the mighty Alighieri; therefore the child breathed Dante (so to speak), but did not think Dante, nor lay him to heart. . . . Dante Alighieri was a sort of Banshee in the Charlotte Street houses; his shriek audible even to familiarity, but the message of it not scrutinized.<sup>4</sup>*

Young Rossetti preferred the writings of Sir Walter Scott and similar tales of romantic adventure, but by age sixteen he began to translate the poetry of his namesake and the empathy he felt was immediate. In 1848, the year he first modified his name, he completed his English translation of *La Vita Nuova*. His interpretation, seemingly untouched by his father's complex and speculative analyses, was highly colored by his adolescent concepts of romantic love. To Rossetti, *La Vita Nuova* was a love story. He believed that Dante was reborn at the sight of Beatrice, whom he understood to be the ultimate symbol of love; so he broke with tradition by translating "nuova" as "new," rather than "early," suggesting that life devoted to love was a distinct realm of being.<sup>5</sup>

Rossetti also explored the meaning of *La Vita Nuova* in his early work as a painter. The first study for *The Salutation of Beatrice* (Fogg Art Museum), drawn in 1849, expressed Rossetti's idea that Beatrice, or ideal love, was beyond mortal attainment. Dante is depicted meeting Beatrice twice. On the left, she passes through the streets of Florence, and when Dante greets her, she returns the gesture, but continues on her way. On the right, as described in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante and Beatrice meet in Paradise. As Beatrice approaches, she raises her veil, revealing that Beatrice will accept Dante's love only after his earthly existence. Between these vignettes, Rossetti placed a figure of Love holding a sundial, which marks the hour of Beatrice's death, and a torch, signi-