

“I SPEAK TO MY EYES”:
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI’S TRANSLATED IMAGES OF
DANTE ALIGHIERI’S *LA VITA NUOVA*

Laura Mayne

The famous “List of Immortals” drawn up by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at their founding meeting is striking for its inclusion of both artists and writers, evidencing the interconnection of literature and painting from the very beginning. The list demonstrates an attempt to incorporate a predominantly Italian cultural heritage with an English one, a transgressive eclecticism, to use Isobel Armstrong’s term (18). This complexly negotiated revival reaches its climax in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s double-works. For Rossetti there is a figure whose presence is felt in many of his creations, uniting them as the source of inspiration behind his exploration of the complex relationship between word and image: Dante Alighieri. Dante was integral to Rossetti’s self-identity and his poetry. In 1848, Rossetti began *The Early Italian Poets: From Ciullo D’Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100–1200–1300) in the Original Metres Together with Dante’s Vita Nuova Translated by D.G. Rossetti*, which was published in 1861. It was the first English translation of early Italian poetry and the *Vita Nuova* in rhymed verse and original metre (Spinuzzi and Bizzotto 102). Rossetti presented the book as part of the wider movement in Victorian England to capture Italy’s cultural heritage, describing it as “the only contribution I expect to make to our English knowledge of old Italy” (*Early*, Preface x).

In his Preface to *The Early Italian Poets*, Rossetti outlined his theories on translation:

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 this chief aim. I say *literalness*, – not fidelity, which is by no means the same thing. (*Early*, Preface viii)

Rossetti purports translation to be a means of cultural aesthetic enrichment

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 26 (Spring 2017)