

DANTE'S LA VITA NUOVA AND  
TWO PRE-RAPHAELITE BEATRICES

Victorian medievalism differs from Romanticism on the point of -- what else? -- usefulness. Whereas the early British 19th century Romantics and their Gothic predecessors had sought to restore the imaginative vision of the Middle Ages by reviving and imitating its literature and architecture, the Victorians turned instead to its history in order to recover the values that had informed and ennobled its daily life. Carlyle's Past and Present of 1843, the source of the particularly Victorian version of medievalism, was intended after all as a sort of "mirror for magnates."

The British take a patriotic delight in anti-Catholicism, and the fact that Catholicism was the sine qua non of medieval life and imagination seems not to have troubled the medievalists of any generation -- with two notable Victorian exceptions. Arnold, standing at a distance from the Grande Chartreuse, laments his inability even to pretend to get the feeling. Newman, filled with the feeling, realizes that total submission to medieval orthodoxy is the only logical conclusion. The Pre-Raphaelites struck an alternative that united historical medievalism with its Romantic efflorescence in terms that satisfied as well the Victorian demands of practicality. Even before the development of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, Rossetti had recognized the need for a reverence, an intensity, and, especially, a conviction of oneself as an immortal soul that Catholicism had provided. Already possessed with a reverence for literature and convinced of his "vocation" for art, he more or less consciously developed a religion of Beauty, the doctrine of which had been laid down for him first by Shelley, then by Keats. "Art" was both the object and act of worship, and the Pre-Raphaelites (by whom I mean those painters, poets, critics, and patrons under the direct influence of Rossetti) sought to create an art -- and a society -- that was both genuinely medieval and genuinely modern by living and working in the same modes, the same moods as their medieval counterparts.

Pre-Raphaelitism was, then, not so much a style as a way of life for artists,<sup>1</sup> and the key to its practical aesthetic lay in Rossetti's father's library of medieval Italian literature: the almost unknown (in England), early work of Dante and his contemporaries, the stilnovisti, which Rossetti translated in the mid-1840's but did not publish until 1861. The stilnovisti doctrine of Love provided Rossetti with an already-secularized medieval religion in terms entirely compatible with Rossetti's "Beauty," but applicable to human beings as well as works of art.

Rossetti's father had devoted his expatriate life in London to