

A COMMENTARY ON SOME OF ROSSETTI'S TRANSLATIONS FROM DANTE

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Overshadowed by the spectacular character and success of his 1870 volume of *Poems*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's first book, *The Early Italian Poets* (1861), is at least as impressive, and was easily as influential, as his more celebrated book of "original" poetry. Like the latter, however, Rossetti's great book of translations--the adjective does not overstate the case, as I hope to show here--fell into obscurity with the coming of the Modernist movement. The travesty of that anamnesis is only now becoming clear to us.

So much of the lost historical record has to be recovered. The case of Rossetti's book of translations is particularly salient, however, because without it Ezra Pound's work would probably not have been possible. Pound's theory of translation -- which dominates ideas about translation in the twentieth century -- is drawn straight out of Rossetti's prefatory commentary to his 1861 book. More significant than that, the project of the *Cantos*--or at least its initiating ideas as articulated in his early essays and put into practice in the first thirty cantos -- translates that theory of translation into an entire poetic program -- the now famous "poem including history." In *A Draft of XXX Cantos* (1930) that history is largely aesthetic and cultural--in the important sense that cultural work is taken as normative for Pound's ideas about social order.

Rossetti was never much impassioned with ideas of social redemption, and while he worked closely with Ruskin for a number of crucial years, he turned more inward as he grew older. That biographical trajectory has helped us forget the Poundian connection--a connection usefully recalled when we read Rossetti's *The Early Italian Poets*.

Rossetti's informing ideas about translating poetry are not difficult to recover. They are exceedingly interesting. First of all is the rule that "a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one" by the translator (*EIT*, viii). This thought follows from the more general cultural/aesthetic prescription that "the only true motive for putting