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978-1-108-05205-4 - Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family-Letters: Volume 1

Edited by William Michael Rossetti

Excerpt

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MEMOIR
OF
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI
BY
WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI.

Be sure that Love ordained for souls more meek
His roadside dells of rest.

VOL. I.

I

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I.

BIRTH.

GABRIEL CHARLES DANTE ROSSETTI, commonly known as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was born on 12 May 1828, at No. 38 Charlotte Street, Portland Place, London. This house is the last or most northerly house, but one,¹ on the right-hand or eastern side of the street, as you turn into it to the left, down Weymouth Street, out of Portland Place. Charlotte Street, beyond No. 39, forms a *cul-de-sac*. The infant was baptized at the neighbouring All Souls' Church, Langham Place, as a member of the Church of England. From his father he received the name Gabriel; from his godfather the name Charles; and from poetical and literary associations the name Dante. His godfather was Mr. Charles Lyell, of Kinnordy, Kirriemuir, Forfarshire; a keen votary of Dante and Italian literature, a helpful friend to our father, and himself father of the celebrated geologist, Sir Charles Lyell. Some living members of the Lyell family continue to be well known to the present generation.

II.

PARENTAGE.

OUR parents were Gabriele Pasquale Giuseppe Rossetti (always called Gabriele Rossetti), and Frances Mary Lavina

¹ No. 39 is now to the right hand of No. 38. It appears to me that this was not the case when we lived in No. 38, but that that was then the last house of all. The closed-up end of the street has been wholly altered since my boyish days.

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Rossetti, *née* Polidori; and, before proceeding further with my narrative, I shall give some particulars about them, and about other members of the family.

Gabriele Rossetti was born on 28 February 1783, in the city of Vasto, named also (by a corruption from Longobard nomenclature) Vasto Ammone, in the Province of Abruzzo Citeriore, on the Adriatic coast of the then Kingdom of Naples. Vasto is a very ancient place, a municipal town of the Romans, then designated Histonium. We are not bound—though some enthusiasts feel themselves permitted—to believe that it was founded by the Homeric hero Diomed: its patron saint is the Archangel Michael. Gabriele was the youngest son of Nicola Rossetti, and his wife Maria Francesca, *née* Pietrocola. Nicola Rossetti was a Blacksmith, of very moderate means;¹ a man of somewhat severe and irascible nature, whose death ensued not long after the French-republican invasion of the Kingdom of Naples in 1799. The French put some affront upon him—I believe they gave him a smart beating for failing or neglecting to furnish required provisions; and, being unable to stomach this, or to resent it as he would have liked, his health declined, and soon he was no more. His wife belonged to a local family of fair credit: but, like other Italian women of that period, she received no scholastic training; she could not write nor even read. The name Rossetti might be translated into “Ruddykins” or “Redkins” as an English

¹ A Vastese connexion of mine, Signor Giuseppe Marchesani, favoured me, early in 1895, with a number of mortuary and other inscriptions which he had composed to various members of the family. I will give here the one relating to Nicola Rossetti, who probably remains otherwise unrecorded, unless by some “forlorn hic jacet.” Of course anything written in a lapidary style reads less well in my English than in Marchesani’s Italian. “Nicola Rossetti, Blacksmith poor and honourable, lovingly sent in boyhood to their first studies his sons, carefully nurtured in childhood. If Fortune neglected him, provident Nature ultimately distinguished, in the obscure Artizan, the well-graced Father, who, to the strokes of his hammer on the battered anvil, sent forth the sonorous and glorious echo, beyond remote Abruzzo, into Italy and other lands.”

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equivalent. My father used to say that the Rossetti race was an offshoot of the Della Guardia family, well known and still subsisting in Vasto; and that at some date or other certain children of the Della Guardia stock were noted for florid complexion and reddish hair, and thus got called "the Rossetti," in accordance with the Italian hobby for nicknames, and that this name gradually stuck to them as a patronymic.

Nicola and Maria Francesca Rossetti had a rather large family, four sons and three daughters, and three of the sons earned distinction. There was Domenico, who was versed (as a local historian records) "in medical science, in civil and canonical law, and in theology," writing in Italian, Latin, French, and to some extent Hebrew, and was "the first among mortals who daringly descended into the Grotto of Montecalvo near Nice." On this theme he wrote a poem in three cantos, besides other poems (two volumes, printed in Parma) and prose: he was besides an Improvisatore. Born in 1772, he died comparatively young in 1816. There was also Andrea, the eldest brother, who became a Canon of San Giuseppe in Vasto; and thirdly, Gabriele, whom I may be excused for regarding as a more important writer than even the polyglot Domenico. I might include, as showing that verse-writing ran in the family, the fourth son, Antonio, who exercised the humble calling of a wig-maker and barber: he likewise versified in an off-hand popular manner, and was of some note to his fellow-townsmen.

Gabriele Rossetti came into the world well endowed for the arts. As it turned out, he took to poetry and other forms of literature; but he might equally have excelled in drawing or in vocal music. I have before me as I write three MSS. containing specimens of his early skill as a draughtsman, done when he was twenty years old or thereabouts. The drawings are illustrations to poems (juvenile enough) of his own composition, and are surprisingly precise and dainty in execution. One would have little hesitation in calling them copper-engravings; but they are, in fact, pen-designs done with sepia, which he himself extracted

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from the cuttlefish or "calamarello," so dear to Neapolitan gourmands. An ornamental headpiece, two decorative title-pages, and two landscapes founded on traditions of Claude or Gaspar Poussin, are his own inventions. One drawing is a group of two women after Mignard; and two or three others may also be copies. From my earliest childhood I have looked with astonishment on these performances as pieces of manipulation; and, after a lifetime spent among artists, I hardly know what to put beside them in their own limited line of attempt. Then, as to music, Gabriele had a beautiful tenor-voice, sweet and sonorous in a high degree. It received no regular cultivation, but was such that he was more than once urged to train himself for the operatic stage—a mode of life, however, for which he had no sort of inclination.

The local magnate was the Marchese del Vasto, of the great historic house of D'Avalos, into which the famous Vittoria Colonna married. He was feudal Lord of the Vastese, and they acknowledged themselves his "vassals," though this state of things, in the epoch of a Robespierre and a Napoleon, was not destined to continue long. The attention of the Marchese was soon called to the uncommon promise of his growing-up vassal Gabriele Rossetti, and, after some well-conducted schooling in Vasto, the youth was sent in 1804, under the patronage of this nobleman, to study in the University of Naples. His education here was cut short after a year and a month, and consequently had not a very wide range. In middle life he read Latin with ease, and retained some remnant of geometry and mathematics, but of Greek he had no knowledge. In French he was well versed, speaking the language with great fluency and an amusing assumption of the tone of a Frenchman. English he acquired by practice in Malta and in this country, and could both read and talk it tolerably enough, though he never did so when he had the option of Italian.

Rossetti was just twenty-three years of age when the Bourbon king, Ferdinand I, was turned out of his con-

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tinental dominion, and had to retire into Sicily, and Joseph Bonaparte reigned in his stead. With Ferdinand vanished the Marchese del Vasto, who was his Court-Majordomo. Thus all the years of Rossetti's early manhood were passed in association with a Napoleonic and not a Bourbon order of ideas. As a sequel to his first volume of poems, published in 1807, he obtained an appointment as librettist in the operatic theatre of San Carlo, writing three or more operabooks, one of them named *Giulio Sabino*. He was kept in hot water, however, by the exigencies of managers and vocalists, and got transferred to the Curatorship of Ancient Marbles and Bronzes in the Museum of Naples. He figured in the Academy of the Arcadi as "Filidauro Labidiense." There used to be a catch,—

"Rossini, Rossetti,
Divini, imperfetti";

but whether my father was ever linked with Rossini in any operatic production I am unable to say. Rossetti was well received at the Court of King Joachim (Murat), the successor of Joseph. I have heard him say that he knew something of almost all the Bonapartes, except only the great Napoleon. I possess a slight portrait of him done by the Princess Charlotte Bonaparte; and another of the family, Lady Dudley Stuart, acted as godmother to his daughter Christina. In my own time Prince Pierre Bonaparte (too notorious as the homicide of Victor Noir) was frequently in our house; occasionally also Prince Louis Napoleon, the unduly glorified and duly execrated Napoleon III., of whom my father would emphatically declare that he could never trace in him one grain (*neppure un' ombra*) of Liberalism. King Joachim fell in 1815, and King Ferdinand was restored to his capital city, Naples; a state of things not likely to be much to the taste of Gabriele Rossetti—who in 1813 had acted as Secretary to that part of the provisional government, sent by Joachim to Rome, which looked after public instruction and the fine arts. He did not, however, under the

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restored Bourbon, lose his post in the Museum. An agitation ensued for a constitution similar to that which the Spaniards established in 1819—the secret society of the Carbonari, in which Rossetti was a member of the General Assembly, being especially active in this direction. In 1820 there was a military uprising, and Ferdinand had to grant the constitution—probably with a fixed intention of revoking it at the first opportunity. Rossetti's ode to the Dawn of the Constitution-day, "Sei pur bella cogli astri sul crine" ("Lovely art thou with stars in hair"), was in every Neapolitan mouth. In 1821 the king, then sojourning in Austria, abolished the constitution, and suppressed it with the aid of Austrian troops. Carbonarism was made a capital offence, and the leading constitutionalists were denounced and proscribed, among them Rossetti. He is said to have been viewed by the king with especial abhorrence, partly because various writings, not really his, were attributed to him, and partly because one of his lyrics contained the lines—

"I Sandi ed i Luveli
Non son finiti ancor,"

(Sands and Louvels are not yet extinct.) The reference, it will be perceived, is to the political assassination of Kotzebue by Sand, and of the Duc de Berri by Louvel, with a suggestion that a like fate might easily befall King Ferdinand. Rossetti did not say that it *ought* to befall him; but the king was not inclined to take a good-natured view of the matter, or to construe the phrase rather as a loyal warning than as an incitement to a deed of blood. The peccant poet lay concealed in Naples for three months, beginning in March 1821; finally the British admiral, Sir Graham Moore, pressed by his generous wife who knew and liked Rossetti, furnished him with a British uniform, got him off in a carriage to the harbour, and shipped him to Malta. I have before me a printed proclamation of King Ferdinand—the original document, dated 28 September 1822—granting an amnesty to persons concerned in the revolutionary or

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constitutional movement, with the exception of thirteen men expressly named. My father is the thirteenth. In Malta he remained about two years and a half, holding classes (as indeed he had previously done in Naples) for instruction in the Latin and Italian languages and literature, and most liberally befriended by the English poet and diplomatist, John Hookham Frere, the translator of Aristophanes: their amicable relations continued after distance had separated them. Deep indeed were the affection and respect which Rossetti entertained for Frere. One of my vivid reminiscences is of the day when the death of Frere was announced to him,¹ in 1846. With tears in his half-sightless eyes and the passionate fervour of a southern Italian, my father fell on his knees, and exclaimed, "Anima bella, benedetta sii tu, dovunque sei!"²

Rossetti had long been a noted Improvisatore, as well as a poet in the accustomed way (he continued to improvise to some extent for a while, even after coming to London), and this, with his other gifts, made him popular in Maltese society. After a while, however, he was harassed by the spies or other emissaries of the Bourbon Government, which embittered his position so much that he resolved to have done with Malta, and settle in England. Here he arrived in January or February 1824, and fixed himself in London. He soon made acquaintance with the Polidori family, and a mutual attachment united him in marriage with the second daughter, Frances Mary Lavinia, in April 1826. He subsisted by teaching Italian, and held perhaps the foremost place in that vocation. In 1831 he was appointed Professor of Italian in King's College, London. This professorship was not a sinecure; but the students were few, and became fewer from about 1840 onwards, when the German language began decidedly to supersede the Italian in public favour. My

¹ The person who announced it was Mr. Edward Graham, the associate of Shelley in early youth. He had taken to the musical profession, and was a man of uncommonly handsome presence: his bodily were superior to his mental endowments.

² "Noble soul, blessed be thou wherever thou art."

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father made at the best a very moderate income; yet this sufficed for all the requirements of himself, and his wife and four children, and no man could be more heartily contented with what he got—more strenuous and cheerful in working for it, or more willing “to cut his coat” (he never *turned* it) “according to his cloth.” The British religion of “keeping up appearances” was unknown—thank Heaven—in my paternal home; my father disregarded it from temperament and foreign way of thinking and living, and my mother contented it with modest or noble superiority. The tolerably thriving condition of our household declined with my father’s decline in health, which began towards 1842: interruption of professional work, waning employment, inability to take up such employment as offered, necessarily ensued. In 1843 (having hitherto had uncommonly keen eyesight) he suddenly lost one eye through amaurosis, and the other eye was greatly weakened and in constant peril, though he was never bereft of sight totally. A real tussle for the means of subsistence now arose, but by one method or other all was tided over. Our scale of living, if somewhat more threadbare and dingy, did not materially dwindle from its unassuming yet comfortable average; and no butcher nor baker nor candlestick-maker ever had a claim upon us for a sixpence unpaid. In his closing years my father had more than one stroke of paralysis. Some of these were of a formidable kind; yet he got over them to a substantial extent, lived on in a suffering state of body, and with mental faculties weakened, though not impaired in any definite and absolute way, and continued diligent in reading and writing almost to the last day of his life. His sufferings, often severe, were borne with patience and courage (he had an ample stock of both qualities), though not with that unemotional calm which would have been foreign to his Italian nature. For nearly a year before his death he lived, with his wife and daughter Christina, at Frome Selwood in Somerset; but finally he returned to London, and died at No. 166 Albany Street, Regent’s Park, on 26 April 1854, firm-minded and placid, and glad to be