INTRODUCTION

As an accepted, individual language, Italian was a very late developer: the great staying power of Latin, its use in the Law, the Church, philosophy, science and diplomacy, and the prestige attached to it as the language of the immutable Empire, all combined to relegate the vernacular into almost negligible inferiority. 'The holy, solemn and everlasting Latin language remained the official language of the new state as of the ancient empire, the language of diplomatic documents and pronouncements, of philosophers and men of science, the language in which the Emperor and King spoke to the world and to posterity . . . while the vulgar idiom, as yet uncertain, changeable and parochial, served to express more petty and trivial sentiments, and belonged to the relationships of private life.'¹

Dante in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* I,x-xv, examines the chief dialects of the Italian vernacular, and distinguishes fourteen main types geographically; but he adds rather despondently, 'If we could calculate the primary, secondary, and subordinate variations of the Vulgar Tongue of Italy, we should find in this tiny corner of the world that the varieties of speech not only come up to a thousand, but even to many more.'² He goes on to reject all the vernaculars that belong to specific regions, and to suggest that there must be some ideal Italian language, common to all parts of the country without being peculiar to any, which he calls 'illustrious', 'cardinal' (i.e. of crucial importance), 'courtly' and 'curial' (i.e. used in the highest courts of justice).

That was probably written in 1303; a good hundred

¹ A. De Stefano, *La Cultura alla Corte di Federico II Imperatore*, Bologna 1950 (my translation).

² Translated by A. G. Ferrers Howell.

years earlier, Italian literature can be said to have begun, with the imitation by Northern Italian poets of a successful vernacular, the Provençal. Manfredi II Lancia exchanges verses with Peire Vidal, and Albert Marquis Malaspina with Raimbaut de Vaqueiras, in the latter's language, before the Fourth Crusade; Provençal *troubadours* and *jongleurs* visit the courts of Malaspina, Montferrat, Modena, Este and Ravenna from the beginning of the thirteenth century, and in increasingly large flocks as the Albigensian Crusade makes life more and more uncomfortable for practitioners of the *gay saber* in the country of its origins. Elias Cairel and Folquet de Romans are known to have visited the court of the Emperor Frederick; Aimeric de Pegulhan wrote a famous encomium of him, the *Metgia*, portraying him as the master physician who alone could heal the country's ills; Folquet de Romans wrote him a poem of good advice, the *conselh*; and Guilhem Figueira composed swingeing political-satirical poems both for and against him with equal fluency.

The poets of Northern Italy writing in this acquired vernacular adopted most readily the *sirventes* (political or personal satire) and the *tenso* (dialogue-poem of argument); many of them, such as Lafranc Cigala, Percival Doria, Bonifacio Calvo of Genoa, are judges, magistrates, or civil servants, men of substance, merchants, holders of respected public positions. They belonged to their town or commune, like Luchetto Gattilusio, *podestà* of Bologna and Cremona, author of political poems and of a discussion poem with Calvo; Ramberino de Buvaelli, *podestà* of several North Italian towns and love-poet; Percival Doria, a supporter of Manfred and Imperial Vicar General of the March of Ancona, who wrote poems in both Provençal and Italian; Bonifacio Calvo himself, exchanging poems from a Venetian gaol with Bertolomeu Zorzi, on the policies and character of their respective cities. The *Donatz Proensals*, a Provençal grammar written for Italians desirous of composing poetry, appears in the early

1240s, and is dedicated to Giacomo de Morra, imperial captain of the Duchy of Spoleto and *podestà* of Treviso—who may be identical with the poet Giacomino Pugliese.

Thus a body of material—conventional expressions and technical language, the thought-patterns of *cortesia* (however unreal and out of place they might be in the new non-feudal social setting of the communes and municipalities), methods of building a poem and rules of taste—became available to poets who were not yet writing in their own vernaculars; in Sicily, at the court of the astounding Emperor Frederick, a new language is evolved—not the actual dialect of the island, but a deliberately created literary *koiné*, as the Provençal had been, a *volgare illustre* accessible to all educated people—in which the new poetry was to be written. Sicily was peopled by a rich mixture of Normans, Greeks and Arabs, and the Emperor, aware of the growing political importance of the vernacular tongues, saw in such a language ‘a fit instrument to create and cement the moral and political unity of the peoples under his rule.’¹

The Sicilian poetry is remarkable for its homogeneity and for the family resemblance between the work of its representatives; for the almost total absence of the Lady, around whom the Provençal poetry had centred; and for the exceedingly subtle philosophical discussion, analysis and dissection of Love, which was bound to develop in an atmosphere of scientific and scholastic thinkers, ‘more sensitive to virtuosity than to sincerity, and to artifice than to the heart’s inspiration.’² Many of the poets who surrounded the Emperor were philosophers, natural scientists, men of law, who would be accustomed to the subtle distinctions and thorough-going disputations connected with their own subjects, and framed according to set rules and forms, in Latin. Hence the refined intricacy of this love-poetry, and

¹ De Stefano, *op. cit.*

² De Stefano, *op. cit.*

hence the absence of what Maier calls 'a true and genuine primitiveness' in the work of the Sicilian school—it was born old.

After the Emperor's death in 1250, the Tuscan poets begin to predominate, and the literary centre of gravity shifts northward again, from the Imperial court to the politically chequered world of autonomous, democratically ruled municipalities where exile, bitter faction-fighting and armed riots involving the whole city were matters of daily reality and personal experience; at least five of the poets represented in the second half of this collection had to go into exile for political reasons. Some of the personal poems (for instance, Dante de Maiano's rude sonnet on Dante Alighieri's dream, or Cecco Angiolieri's ferocious sonnets against his father) would seem to derive some of their outspokenness and slangy savagery from a context of such unrest and strife; they make earlier poems in this genre (for example, Rustico di Filippo's jocular zoological sonnet on Messer Messerin) look very mild and good-natured. These poets could write within the conventions of the Sicilian school—even Cecco produces courtly sonnets concerning the lady's cruelty, the heart's servitude, the hopelessness of loving and the impossibility of 'disamare',¹ in the approved fashion—but they were discovering other themes and other registers, other realities that might call for harshly vivid expression.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was born in 1828, into a family of Italian exiles living in London and an atmosphere of intelligent enthusiasm for Italian literature; his father and grandfather had written Dante criticism of uneven perspicacity, and his own interest in the poet and his contemporaries probably developed and was encouraged when he was quite young. William Michael Rossetti says that his brother's interest in Dante 'may have begun towards the year 1843', and again, 'the

¹ 'un-loving', freeing oneself, ceasing to love.

great majority of these translations must have been executed in the years 1846 to 1848; some of them may be even a little earlier, others probably as late as 1850, but I should say very few belong to any date subsequent to that. He found his materials partly at home, and partly in the library of the British Museum, which he haunted with much assiduity for the purpose' (Preface to the 1892 edition). In his bibliography of Dante Gabriel (1905), William Michael explains, 'Most of the translations were made many years before 1861: some of them may be as early as 1845—not many would be later than 1849 . . . The book was well received; and it was recognized that the poetical faculty evinced in it was something more than that of a simple translator. Until this volume came out, very little was known of Rossetti as a poet, most of the few things which he had printed being anonymous.'

It seems likely that Rossetti considered the making of the earlier translations as part of his poetic apprenticeship; they were a form of exercise, helping him to handle English flexibly and in a disciplined way by deliberately keeping to the rhyme-schemes and metres of the originals. Such a self-imposed rigour would be bound to clarify and strengthen his own practice; as William Michael writes in 1892, 'While they serve as a kind of epilogue to the Italian *trecento*, they serve likewise as a kind of prologue to Rossetti's personality among English poets. If he had not undertaken the translations, and had not given them the development which they here assume, some substantial traits in his own poetry would be less intelligibly marked and less securely recognisable.'

Rossetti's declared intention, as he explains in his Preface, is to give a complete and general view of early Italian poetry, to add to 'our English knowledge of old Italy' and to present to 'a fresh nation . . . one more possession of beauty'; his bibliography suggests how difficult it would be for the English reader of the time to acquire an accurate knowledge of the early poets.

Several of the books must have been hard to find, even in 1861; Rossetti admits that the 'best edited collection' available is incomplete and inadequate, and unless the reader's Italian were very good he might find little enough help in them.

The translator assures us of his painstaking thoroughness in both work and revision, and with this William Michael agrees: 'Dante Rossetti', he says, 'was a very fastidious writer . . . He wrote out of a large fund or reserve of thought and consideration, which would culminate in a clear impulse or (as we say) an inspiration. In the execution he was always heedful and reflective from the first, and he spared no after-pains in clarifying and perfecting.'

The first edition of this work appeared in 1861, with the title '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/ Part I. Poets chiefly before Dante./ Part II. Dante and his Circle.' It is dedicated thus: 'Whatever is mine in this book/ is inscribed to my wife./ D.G.R., 1861.'

In 1874 Rossetti brought out a 'revised and rearranged edition' called 'Dante and his Circle:/ With the Italian Poets preceding Him', which reproduces the 1861 preface, inverts the order of the two Parts, and contains two extra poems. A few sentences are omitted from the first edition, and a few others inserted, in the critical matter and footnotes; a poem attributed to Cavalcanti in 1861 is transferred to Cecco; some alterations appear in the text, but generally minor ones, and it begins, 'To my mother/ I dedicate this new edition/ of a book prized by her love.'

This edition is reprinted by William Michael Rossetti in Volume II of his brother's *Collected Works*, in 1886, to which he contributes four notes; and this is again reproduced, 'printed from the same stereo-plates as the

Collected Works', separately in 1892, with a Preface by William Michael.

It is necessary only to mention subsequent editions that I have seen, which had not the benefit of either brother's supervision: Newnes' Classics (1904), Temple Classics (Dent, 1904, the text being 'reproduced with substantial, but not literal, accuracy'), the Muses' Library (Routledge, 1905), *Poems and Translations 1850-1870* (O.U.P., 1913; containing also the prose story 'Hand and Soul'), and the reprints of this, conserving the 1861 order, by Everyman and World's Classics (1914).

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