



Enthymema XXXIV 2023

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”: Ezra Pound, Gabriele Rossetti and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, when Literature meets Esotericism

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Abstract – This article addresses a forgotten aspect of the history of ideas, namely the fact that one of the most important figures of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound, was influenced by Dantean esotericism and the medieval esoteric doctrine of love proposed in the nineteenth century by Gabriele Rossetti. It aims to show the relations between literature and esotericism, in the wake of a dialogue between the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. The study of this unexplored horizon of research is presented here through the epistolary exchange between Pound and Gabriele Rossetti’s granddaughter, Olivia Rossetti Agresti.

Keywords – Literature; esotericism; Ezra Pound; Gabriele Rossetti; Dante; Medieval Doctrine of Love; Modernism; Amnesia in the History of Ideas.

Latino, Piero. “ “Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”: Ezra Pound, Gabriele Rossetti and Olivia Rossetti Agresti, when Literature meets Esotericism”. *Enthymema*, n. XXXIV, 2023, pp. 136-147.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.54103/2037-2426/16923>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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ISSN 2037-2426

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1. Introduction

One of the most interesting examples of reception of Dante’s myth in twentieth-century literature concerns Ezra Pound, where reception relates to the field of esotericism. In Ezra Pound, literature meets esotericism, as the author of the *Cantos* was interested in and influenced by Dantean esotericism. The figure that linked Pound and the esoteric dimension of Dante’s work was Gabriele Rossetti – father of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, Christina Rossetti and the less well-known Maria Francesca Rossetti. Gabriele Rossetti’s wife was Frances Lavinia Polidori, sister of John William Polidori and author of *The Vampyre*. The legacy of Gabriele Rossetti has fallen into oblivion in literary studies, as well as in the history of ideas, though his impact on European culture has been particularly important, both directly and indirectly.¹

This article explores the relationship between Ezra Pound and Gabriele Rossetti – more precisely, the influence on Pound’s ideas and literary production of Dantean esotericism and medieval love literature as proposed by Rossetti.

Gabriele Rossetti was the first scholar to posit the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work and of medieval love literature, initiating the “heterodox” current of Dantean studies, whose main exponent in the twentieth century was Luigi Valli.² The book by Valli *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, published in 1928, followed in the footsteps of Gabriele Rossetti, who developed a theory about the esoteric dimension of literature in various works; only one of these was translated into English, namely *Sullo spirito antipapale che produsse la riforma, e sulla segreta influenza che esercitò nella letteratura d’Europa, e specialmente d’Italia* (1832), translated by Caroline Ward with the title *Disquisition on the Antipapal Spirit which Produced the Reformation; Its Secret Influence on the Literature of Europe in General and of Italy in Particular* (1834). Other significant works include *La Beatrice di Dante* (1852), whilst Gabriele Rossetti’s most important work is *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* (1840).

According to Gabriele Rossetti, the Italian love poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo* used a conventional and coded language in their poems to conceal initiatory ideas. They belonged to the initiatory Order of the *Fedeli d’Amore* (the Faithful in Love) and shared an esoteric doctrine of love which corresponded to the attainment of Divine Wisdom. This was a spiritual love, hidden by the veil of human love, with its emotions and eroticism – the same esoteric love doctrine of the Sufi tradition or the love for the symbolic woman in Solomon’s *Song of Songs*. This esoteric doctrine appears to originate from the Eleusian mysteries of ancient Greece and from ancient Egyptian traditions, which would have been known by Italian love poets and French

¹ On the figure of Gabriele Rossetti, see Di Brigida; Vincent.

² On Dantean esotericism, see Salzani. For a concise but also detailed introduction on Dantean esotericism, see Ciavolella, “Esoteric Interpretations of the *Divine Comedy*”; the original article is in Italian: Ciavolella, “Il testo moltiplicato: interpretazioni esoteriche della Divina Commedia”.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

troubadours, and more generally by medieval love poets in Europe. This hermetic tradition did not end in the Middle Ages; in fact, according to Rossetti it continued into the Renaissance, thence to the nineteenth century. Rossetti proposed the idea of a hidden esoteric dimension in European literature, linked to a secret history of an underground hermetic and heretical tradition. Moreover, he argued that this secret tradition was closely linked with Rosicrucianism and modern freemasonry, and that it was contested by the Church. This was another reason he gave for the coded language of medieval love poetry. It was necessary both for expressing an esoteric knowledge and for avoiding persecution.

I have briefly summed up the question of the esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work and of medieval love literature proposed by Gabriele Rossetti, and I shall conclude this brief introduction by pointing out that Rossetti’s work was considered a dangerous book by the academic establishment in the nineteenth century and due to its content it was destroyed and withdrawn from sale. Only a few copies remained in circulation in Europe, whilst the others were burned.³

2. Ezra Pound and Dantean esotericism according to Gabriele Rossetti

The relationship between Rossetti and Pound has, so far, not been studied in depth. Only a handful of scholars have researched this interesting and relatively untouched aspect, including Leon Surette, Demetres Tryphonopoulous and Akiko Miyake. In fact, to my knowledge, Miyake is the only scholar who has linked Pound’s work to Dante following Gabriele Rossetti’s exegetic interpretation. In her book *Ezra Pound and the Mysteries of Love* (1991), Miyake shows the close link between the *Cantos* and Rossetti’s *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* and argues that Pound’s *Cantos* are entirely inspired by Rossetti’s book. In her introduction, she expresses her opinion on the relationship between the work of Pound and Rossetti: “I began the present work after I read Gabriele Rossetti’s *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* and discovered that Pound had used Rossetti’s theme to unite the immense fields of his interest in *The Cantos*” (Miyake IX). For example, she writes:

To my surprise, not only were these images scattered all over Pound’s earlier cantos and collected in the paradisaic scenes of the later cantos; they were also used in the same senses in which Rossetti had used them. One can trace Pound’s way to heaven by using Rossetti’s *Il Mistero* as a commentary. (Miyake IX-X)

Thus, for Miyake, the work of Rossetti is a commentary on Pound’s *Cantos*. The structure, themes and symbols are the same, whilst the way Pound approaches his work to some extent echoes the concepts expressed by Rossetti. Many ideas voiced by Ezra Pound in his *Cantos*, according to Miyake, are taken from Rossetti’s work:

The basic assumption of Pound’s ascent to heaven is taken from Rossetti’s idea that the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries married the fertility goddess ritualistically and that their souls then dwelt partly in heaven, in the form of the goddess who would eventually raise them to heaven. The troubadours, along with Dante and his contemporary Italian poets, found the equivalent of their heavenly souls in their mystical paramours who led them heavenward. Their souls in heaven resemble the neo-Platonic concept of Plotinus’s higher Soul, which is shared by the individual’s soul located in his own body. Plotinus’s philosophy, not surprisingly, grew out of the Greek sensibility developed through Greek fertility rites and mysteries. Learning of this supposed continuity among medieval love mysticism, Plotinus, and the Eleusinian fertility rites, Pound named

³ On the obstacles that Gabriele Rossetti had to face because of the publication of his book *Il mistero dell’Amor platonico del Medio Evo*, see Vercesi.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

his own mystical lady and the soul in heaven “Isis”, following the Egyptian version of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In his account of heaven (90/606), the poet confesses that his Isis has lifted him there. (Miyake X)

Scholars had recognized the mystical idea of love present in Pound’s *Cantos*, but no one, before Akiko Miyake, had considered *The Cantos* to be so closely linked to Rossetti’s *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo*, in which the traditions of mystical love are seen as the result of a filiation linking the Eleusinian Mysteries, Provençal troubadours and Italian medieval poetry.

What is important to point out here are the links between Pound and Dante’s esotericism, as well as medieval love poetry. He did so with reference to Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli, who, as I have previously mentioned, was one of the most important figures of the so-called “heterodox” school of Dantean studies.⁴

Ezra Pound found the esotericism of Dante and love poetry of great interest and referred to it on various occasions, for example, in the *Guide to Kulchur*, in *Terra Italica* and in the essay “Cavalcanti”. He also made specific reference to Luigi Valli’s book *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*, switching from scepticism and disagreement to fascination – an ambivalent stance towards Valli’s work which is interesting. In fact, both Gabriele Rossetti and Luigi Valli expressed the same ideas (though with a different approach); whilst the former was always praised, the latter was criticized on some occasions and commended in others. To Pound, Valli’s *Linguaggio segreto di Dante* was a “stimulant”, though he does not agree “with many of the details of his explanations” (*Cavalcanti* 8). However, as Pound writes, “Valli deserves thanks for disturbing a too facile acceptance of cut and dried acceptances. In one or two cases where I think him wrong, I certainly owe him a quickened curiosity, and a better guess than I should have made without the irritant of his volume” (*Cavalcanti* 222).

Pound’s interest in Valli’s work originates in the occult milieu of the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, it was the theosophist George Robert Stowe Mead (founder of the London theosophical review *The Quest*) who recommended that Pound read *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*.⁵ But the relationship between Pound and Valli, and with Gabriele Rossetti, owes a great deal to one person: Olivia Rossetti Agresti.⁶ She was the daughter of William Michael Rossetti and Lucy Madox Brown, thus the granddaughter of Gabriele Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown. She was married to Antonio Agresti, whose essays on art and literature (more precisely on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the Pre-Raphaelite Movement and Dante) influenced figures such as James Joyce.⁷

Olivia Rossetti Agresti merits a study *per se* on her cultural role in the twentieth century, but what interests me is the role that she had in spreading Rossetti’s works and ideas across the world. In fact, it was Olivia Rossetti Agresti who gave Luigi Valli one of the last copies of Rossetti’s *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*, as confirmed by Valli himself who thanked her in his *Linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei Fedeli d’Amore*: “I thank here the kind Miss Olivia Rossetti Agresti, granddaughter of Gabriele Rossetti and wife of my dear late friend Antonio Agresti, who allowed me to examine this precious work in depth, the exact copy which belonged to the Poet”

⁴ Luigi Valli and his esoteric interpretation of Dante’s work has been extensively studied by Stefano Salvani in his *Luigi Valli e l’esoterismo dantesco*.

⁵ In this respect, see Salzani 322-3; Tryphonopoulos 97.

⁶ On the figure of Olivia Rossetti Agresti, see *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia* 5; Tryphonopoulos 18, 47, 65-6; Surette, *The Birth of Modernism* 117-8.

⁷ On the influence of Antonio Agresti on James Joyce, see Robinson 47-50.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

(Valli 17).⁸ Not only was Valli in contact with Olivia Rossetti Agresti, but also with Ezra Pound. In fact, Olivia Rossetti Agresti and Pound corresponded for over twenty years, from 1937 to 1959, and met in person in Rome.⁹ Their correspondence is full of specific and precious insights concerning politics, economics and religion; it also focuses on Gabriele Rossetti and his esoteric interpretation of literature. Significantly, Dantean esotericism and the esoteric love hidden in the literary works of the Middle Ages were one of the most interesting topics of the letters exchanged between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti.

3. An esoteric correspondence: Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti

Olivia Rossetti Agresti wrote to Ezra Pound on 24 September 1956: “looking over my books I find I have two copies of ‘La Beatrice di Dante’ privately printed by Gabriele Rossetti in 1842, so I am sending you one; when you no longer wish to have it you might pass it on to the Catholic University, Washington” (*“I Cease Not to Yowl”* 238). On 6 December 1956, Pound wrote to Olivia Rossetti Agresti to inform her about the reception of Rossetti’s *Beatrice di Dante*:

Later/having put this in wrong kind of envelope, yr/Grampaw’s Beatrice di Dante, arrives. for which my thanks. I doubt it if the Cat/Un. will get it.

[...]

still later. yr/ illustrious ancestor speaks of THREE ragionamenti, and ends with “fine del primo”. Did he write or print the other 2/ or did yr/ bigoted grandma burn the inediti?? Or has everyone forgotten which??

preface {“} non offro tutte e tre in una volta.../ main diversi periodi. {”}

I dont spose yu remember the date the big vol/ was printed. But I can get that from Pearson at Yale. i.e. whether before or after the Beat. Di D. (*“I Cease Not to Yowl”* 237)

In this letter, Pound not only tells Olivia Rossetti Agresti about receiving the book, but he also asks questions about the content of Gabriele Rossetti’s work. In a letter sent the following day, on 7 December 1956, Ezra Pound wrote again to Olivia Rossetti Agresti to obtain more information about her grandfather and to learn more about the secret history and the esoteric doctrine which are hidden, according to Rossetti, in some literary works. “Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?” (*“I Cease Not to Yowl”* 238): these are the first words of the letter summarising Pound’s interest in Gabriele Rossetti’s esoteric interpretation of Dante and love literature:

want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?

Political exile?? escaped from fury and bigotry of Vatican??? not a mason but student of masonry?

Interested to see he hooks D[Dante]/ to Swedenborg, as I have done for 50 years, but can’t recall having found in the VERY small amount of criticism or Dante-Studien that I have looked at.

Prefer text to comments. Of course the Dant-Swed hook^{3/4}up may have filtered thru footnotes, but I can’t recall anything but my own observations of the two writers.

⁸ “Ringrazio qui la gentile Signora Olivia Rossetti Agresti, nipote di Gabriele Rossetti e moglie del mio caro compianto amico Antonio Agresti, la quale mi concesse di poter largamente esaminare quest’opera preziosissima proprio nella copia rimasta tra le mani del Poeta” (Valli 17). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author of this article.

⁹ The whole epistolary correspondence between Ezra Pound and Olivia Rossetti Agresti is contained in *“I Cease Not to Yowl”*. *Ezra Pound’s Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti* (1998) edited by Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

Real masonry, as from China etc. pure down to Mozart. and since flooded with mutts who have NOT the faintest inkling of the mysteries once guarded in an order....

[...]

Your uncle Dant wrote from direct knowledge. Was yr/pa a mason? or had he VIEWS? Naturally Caraffa wanted Dante Al/ dug up. quest' e{} pacifico.

Large gap between Pitagoro and the year 1300. Section d'Or got lost, etc. and renaissance architecture went to...pot an' barocco ...latter term derived from what? baro?

[...]

Dant and Swed. {are} both sound in their schema of increasing enlightened consciousness, someone wrote {me} that Thoreau was hep to superiority of greek culture. all the publicity he has had wd/ appear to have picked out civil disobedience as his one bright idea, incongruous in trying to fit in. etc. (*"I Cease Not to Yowl"* 238-240)¹⁰

This letter is particularly interesting because Pound even associated the esotericism of Dante as proposed by Gabriele Rossetti with the Chinese initiatory and masonic world, as well as with figures such as Mozart. But what I find more relevant is that, in this letter, Ezra Pound stresses that he was involved in this kind of research linking Dante and Swedenborg for almost fifty years of his life. Pound agrees with the idea of a mystical dimension shared by Dante and Swedenborg. According to him, Dante and Swedenborg both had mystical or ecstatic experiences thanks to their “enlightened consciousness”, as he writes in his letter of 7 December 1956. Pound’s interest in mystical ecstasy is confirmed in other correspondence, such as the letter sent to Viola Baxter Jordan on 24 October 1907, where he writes: “I am interested in art and ecstasy, ecstasy which I would define as the sensation of the soul in ascent, art as the expression and sole means of transmuting, of passing on that ecstasy to others” (*Letters to Viola Baxter Jordan* 109). The letter to Viola Baxter Jordan is dated 1907, and the fact that Pound was still interested in such topics in 1956 shows how important mystical matters were to him. It is also worth pointing out that the theme of mystical ecstasy was one of the ideas shared with Luigi Valli with regard to Italian medieval love poetry. As I have already suggested, Pound did not totally agree with Valli’s ideas about the esoterism of medieval love poetry (in particular, Dante’s poetry), but he accepted the possibility “that a great number of men have had certain kinds of emotion and *magari*, of ecstasy”, and that these men had transposed in their writings “indelible records of ideas born of, conjoined with this ecstasy” (*Guide to Kulchur* 225). This is what some love poets of the Middle Ages did, in Pound’s view, passing on their knowledge to future generations.

According to this interpretation, mysticism is the core of a transmission network that spread esoteric knowledge from ancient times up to the twentieth century. Mysticism was also the theme of correspondence between Olivia Rossetti Agresti and Ezra Pound, in which Gabriele Rossetti had a pivotal role, connecting medieval esotericism with modernity. Pound discusses Olivia Rossetti Agresti’s grandfather with her in order to understand certain aspects of medieval mysticism, which was a fundamental topic of Rossetti’s work. In this respect, an example can be found in the letter of 4 September 1955, where Pound mentions St. Victor and alludes to the relationships between mysticism and political power. Gabriele Rossetti (“Yr/grampaw”) is seen by Pound as a person who can provide useful insight in this regard:

Mysticism aimed at getting power/advertised in the rotocalcos. Now lousily the chuRRRche has defended, pardon irony, betrayed her heritage.

HOWever one serious Englander find[s] Ric. St Vic. better than Kant or Coleridge.

¹⁰ Olivia Rossetti Agresti’s reply is dated 25 December 1956; in this letter she summarised her grandfather’s life and work (*"I Cease Not to Yowl"* 241-4).

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

Will any cawflic EVER again have the candour to admit that Xt/ was for some centuries regarded as a symbol and not an individual kike out to monopolize. There ~~being~~ being INTERNAL evidence that monopoly was NOT part of the message. Yr/grampaw has some insight. (“*I Cease Not to Yowl*” 205-6)

It is clear how important Gabriele Rossetti was for Pound in understanding medieval esotericism in the twentieth century. Therefore, Rossetti’s view of esotericism in medieval love literature helped to establish an interesting dialogue between different eras: the Middle Ages and the twentieth century. The medieval esoteric doctrine of love was thus fertile terrain for Pound, and Dante (the esoteric Dante) was a source of inspiration for him. Unfortunately, we do not have Pound’s letter of 4 November 1956 to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, which is lost, but it would certainly have been interesting in relation to Gabriele Rossetti’s *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* and the esoteric doctrine of love of Dante and the *Fedeli d’Amore*. In fact, Olivia Rossetti Agresti’s reply shows that Pound wrote about Rossetti’s esoteric interpretation of literature, alluding to the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. This is what she wrote in her letter of 8 November 1956:

I do not know that Gabriele Rossetti made any references to Cavalcanti or *I Fedeli d’Amore* reading Greek. I sold my copy of the *Amor Platonico* and so cannot look it up for you. I feel sure that they were not familiar with Greek but I see in Valli’s ‘Linguaggio Segreto di Dante’ that Dante’s knowledge of Plotinus came to him through St. Augustine.} } *Contra Faustum*, in which he developed the whole doctrine of *Rachele Sapienza*. Pascoli saw in *Contra Faustum* one of the chief sources of the *Divina Commedia*. (“*I Cease Not to Yowl*” 235-6)

In another interesting letter to Olivia Rossetti Agresti on 23 April 1954, Pound discusses a presumed filiation between Dante and the Rosicrucian tradition, which was a theme that mainly developed in the French occult milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Pound does not mention Rossetti, but he does refer to Luigi Valli, suggesting a filiation between Dante and the Rosicrucians, referencing the masonic affiliation of Mazzini and the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, who was fascinated by the occult:

Nothr point/ a gang of Rosicrucians in Calif/ listing Dante as one of ‘em. Hv/ yu any light on this. {?} also they claim Mazzini whom I tho’t was a mason/ at least they know of some respectable authors and use a candle-stick with 3 branches.

I don’t recall Valli saying rosy-cross, but have v. hazy memory what he did say/ his theory seemed plausible UNTIL he gave illustrations. also they don’t mention Yeats, their largest publicity agent for a number of decades/ must find out if he got expelled for OBstreperosity. All good poets prim/ sec/ Ghibelline. (or do you demur?). (“*I Cease Not to Yowl*” 148)

In this passage, the concept of an initiatory and esoteric filiation linking Dante to the Rosicrucians and Yeats is apparent, and even Mazzini is mentioned as being presumably a freemason.¹¹ Here Pound alludes to a presumed esoteric tradition transmitted throughout the centuries. It is worth pointing out that the idea of a secret history of a Western esoteric tradition was widespread in London’s occult circles in the early twentieth century, as Leon Surette remarks:

¹¹ On the relationship between Mazzini and freemasonry, see Mola 24, 114-8, 141-173, 192-6, 222-97, 308-80, 465-94, 505-59, 615-37. It is worth pointing out that Mazzini was a close friend of Gabriele Rossetti, who was also a freemason (up to the third degree). On this, see the letter of Gabriele Rossetti to Charles Lyell of 18 March 1830 (see Rossetti, *Carteggi. Volume secondo* 516).

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

The esoteric version of secret history dominated the theosophical circles of Kensington in which Pound moved from 1909 until about 1920. Yeats, Orage, Upward, Mead, and Weston all endorsed the theosophical story of an ineffable wisdom surviving from great antiquity¹². (*Birth of Modernism* 123)

We find this idea of a single tradition of wisdom and gnosis in “Psychology and Troubadours” or in the *Cantos* where, as Leon Surette points out, Pound introduces “the secret and occult history of Europe, a history of a carefully hidden albeit widely published wisdom, an esoteric revelation hidden in texts understood by the uninitiated only exoterically” (*Birth of Modernism* 229).

With regard to this secret history and tradition transmitted throughout the centuries, in his *Disquisitions*, Rossetti writes:

the most learned men, and authors of various ages and countries were pupils of this mysterious school [the school of love], and never losing sight of their one grand object, they were constantly on the alert to bring persons of talent and genius to their way of thinking, and to render them co-operators in their bold projects. There can be no doubt that the present state of civilization in Europe is in great measure an effect of the zeal of this school ... The ungovernable thirst for freedom, and the effervescence of political opinions, which have for long agitated the hearts and minds of men throughout Europe, are but the tardy effects of the slow, but unceasing labours of this ancient school. (196-7)

On his part, Pound writes about this secret history in *Guide to Kulchur*:

Secret history is at least twofold. One part consists in the secret corruptions, the personal lusts, avarices etc. that scoundrels keep hidden, another part is the “plus,” the constructive urges, a *secretum* because it passes unnoticed or because no human effort can force it on public attention. (264)

As previously mentioned, Pound believed that the esoteric and secret tradition that he called “celestial” has to do with mysticism, namely with mystical experiences that certain individuals have had at different times and transmitted to future generations, especially through literature. This concept is clearly affirmed, for example, in the article mentioned above, “Psychology and Troubadours”, where Pound writes:

I believe in a sort of permanent basis in humanity, that is to say, I believe that Greek myth arose when someone having passed through delightful psychic experience tried to communicate it to others and found it necessary to screen himself from persecution. Speaking aesthetically, the myths are explications of mood: you may stop there, or you may probe deeper. Certain it is that these myths are only intelligible in a vivid and glittering sense to those people to whom they occur. (*Spirit of Romance* 92)

It goes without saying that the secret history Pound attributed to mysticism has to do, directly or indirectly with politics – a subject of particular interest to Gabriele Rossetti, who was fascinated by the relationship between political-temporal power and the initiatory Orders (including freemasonry) in different historical periods, and who believed that this secret history and doctrine were concealed in literature. Pound subscribed to Rossetti’s esoteric interpretation of literature and history. What is interesting is that the idea of a secret history and a per-

¹² On the continuity of the subterranean and occult tradition transmitted throughout the centuries, see Surette, *A Light from Eleusis* 34-9, 40-1, 57-60; Tryphonopolous 134-5.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
Piero Latino

ennial wisdom has striking similarities with the assertions of some twentieth-century conspiracy theorists, such as Nesta Helen Webster, who demonstrates the forgotten and unacknowledged history of secret societies by considering two approaches, namely political and esoteric:

from very early times occult sects had existed for two purposes – esoteric and political. Whilst the Manicheans, the early Ismailis, the Bogomils, and the Luciferians had concerned themselves mainly with religious or esoteric doctrines, the late Ismailis, the Fatimites, the Karmathites, and Templars had combined secrecy and occult rites with the political aim of domination. We shall find this double tradition running through all the secret society movements up to the present day. (74)

And again, Webster writes:

How is it possible to ignore the existence of an Occult Power at work in the world? Individuals, sects or races fired with the desire of world domination, have provided the fighting forces of destruction, but behind them are the veritable powers of darkness in eternal conflict with the powers of light. (405)

Finally, we should mention Jessie Weston, whose work influenced T. S. Eliot, and who commented:

There is a stream of tradition, running as it were underground, which from time to time rises to the surface, only to be relentlessly suppressed. It may be the Troubadours, the symbolical language of whose love poems is held to convey another, and less innocent, meaning; or the Albigenses, whose destruction the Church holds for a sacred duty. Alchemy, whose Elixir of Life and Philosopher’s Stone are but names veiling a deeper and more spiritual meaning, belongs to the same family ... Of similar origin is that Free-Masonry, which outside our own Islands is even today reckoned as the greatest enemy of the Christian Faith, and which still employs signs and symbols identical with those known and used in the Mysteries of long-vanished faiths. (137-8)

Thus, the occult notion of a secret tradition was a recurrent theme in the esoteric milieu of the early twentieth century, and one of the first scholars who proposed this idea was Gabriele Rossetti. To my knowledge, he was one of the first scholar to investigate the relationship between literature and esotericism, by claiming the existence of an underground hermetic tradition, the implications of which touched politics, religion, and the secret and initiatory Orders. In the field of historical studies, the Abbé Augustin Barruel (one of Rossetti’s sources) was one of the first to introduce the idea of a continuous history of seditious secret societies,¹³ whilst Rossetti was one of the first to do so in literature, by focusing on Dante and medieval love poetry. Pound also subscribed to the notion of a secret *celestial tradition*, which was thoroughly investigated by Demetres Tryphonopoulos in his book *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound’s Cantos* (1992). However, as I have shown in this article, Pound’s approach to the hermetic and secret tradition is far more focused on mystical and esoteric aspects than on political ones. But what I should like to point out is that one of the most important figures of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound, was strongly influenced by a man of letter, Gabriele Rossetti, who was almost completely forgotten and ignored by academia. In fact, Pound was well aware of Gabriele Rossetti’s work and his esoteric interpretation of medieval literature. He even knew that Rossetti’s *Mistero* was burnt after publication and that it immediately became a

¹³ Barruel presented his theories about the secret history in his book *Mémoires pour servir à l’Histoire du Jacobinisme* (1797-1798). Another writer who expressed similar ideas was Reghellini de Schio in his *La Maçonnerie considérée comme le résultat des religions égyptiennes, juives et chrétiennes* (1829). Reghellini was also one of Rossetti’s sources.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”

Piero Latino

rarity since only a few copies were circulating in Europe. In fact, he asked Olivia Rossetti Agresti about this in a letter of 1 February 1956:

Another point/ the Amor Platonicus/ and the monument at Vasto/ your grandfather, or great grand?

The father or grandfather of WMR/D.G/ and which of them the elder? D.G. being 22 in 1850. Christina 19? {?WMR?} and the ma or grandma, who burnt the remaining copies AM/ Plat.? (“I Cease Not to Yowl” 225)

Moreover, Pound acted as an intermediary for the sale of Olivia Rossetti Agresti’s copy of the *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* to the University of Pennsylvania’s library. At a time of financial difficulties, she was obliged to sell the copy of her grandfather’s work, and Pound helped her to find a purchaser.¹⁴ Therefore, Pound was extremely interested in Gabriele Rossetti’s work, and committed to spreading it across the world. Not only was he influenced by him, but he also had an active role in saving Rossetti’s book from oblivion.

4. Conclusion

Pound’s admiration for Gabriele Rossetti and his esoteric interpretation of literature is undeniable, so much so that in 1942 he criticised Thomas Stearns Eliot, expressing his irritation about the Anglo-Catholicism of *The Waste Land*’s author, and called for a new edition of *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico del Medio Evo* thus: “in his *After Strange Gods* Eliot loses all the threads of Arachne, and the new edition of Gabriele Rossetti’s *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* (1840) would be useful” (*Selected Prose* 290).

Pound asked for a new publication of Rossetti’s *Mistero* so that the legacy of this work would not be lost. In the twentieth century, Ezra Pound had an important role in featuring a rediscovery: the esoteric and initiatory love literature of the Middle Ages that spread throughout the centuries, right up to the twentieth century. According to Pound, understanding the esotericism of the Middle Ages means comprehending a part of our culture and especially of modern culture. Dantean esotericism, the esoteric dimension of troubadour poetry and, more broadly, of medieval love poetry in Europe represent for Pound the key to interpreting literature in a new light, namely the hidden and initiatory message contained in literary works, the implications of which concern the history of ideas as well as the cultural, political, and religious aspects. This explains why Ezra Pound was so interested in Gabriele Rossetti’s book *Il Mistero dell’Amor Platonico*, which is unfortunately written only in Italian: there is no translation into English of this work. The contents present in this forgotten book would open new and unexplored horizons of research, not only for the literary domain, but also and especially for the field of studies of Western esotericism. This is the reason why – paraphrasing the words of Pound – “a translation of Gabriele Rossetti’s *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* (1840) would be useful”.

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¹⁴ On the sale of Olivia Rossetti Agresti’s copy of the *Mistero dell’Amor Platonico* to the Library of the University of Pennsylvania with the assistance of Ezra Pound, see “I Cease Not to Yowl” 227; Akiko 226.

“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”

Piero Latino

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“Want to know more of yr/ grand-dad?”
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