Depicting Dante in Anglo-Italian Literary and Visual Arts

Depicting Dante in Anglo-Italian Literary and Visual Arts:

Allegory, Authority and Authenticity

By

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Dedicated to my family
for their everlasting love and support,
and to the memory of my beloved grandfather,
Josef Anton Pytlik
(1921-1997).

Life has bestowed opportunities on me,
which you had been denied.

Conosco i segni de l'antica fiamma.
—Dante Alighieri, *Purg. XXX*, 48.

For last year's words belong to last year's language.
And next year's words await another voice.
—T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

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PREFACE

The initial inspiration for this book was born in Italy in 2003. At that time, I was studying in Pisa and Florence and I visited the Fratelli Alinari exhibition celebrating the 100th anniversary of the competition for a new illustrated edition of Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*. The renowned Florentine photographic studio Alinari, which at the time specialised in reproducing masterpieces, had launched a contest in May 1900 in order to celebrate Dante's imaginative poem and to stimulate contemporary artists to find inspiration in Italy's monolithic work of literary art. Even though the quality of the entries for the competition had fallen short of the jury's expectations and had not lived up to the Fratelli Alinari's desire to inspire future elaboration on Dantean themes, the brothers published the new edition between 1902 and 1903 anyway. Around this time, Florence was a hotbed of Futurism and served as a place of creative confluence for many artists, philosophers and thinkers. F. T. Marinetti published his manifesto *La 'Divina Commedia' è un verminaio di glossatori* in 1909 and, like him, many intellectuals frowned upon the political appropriation of Dante as an ideological forefather of Italian unification. In their opinion, a cult of Dante, the so-called *Dantismo*, would prevent the next generation of literary talents from blossoming in the newly-formed Italian nation and nip their own creative endeavours in the bud. The seminal Alinari exhibition followed in the wake of a resurged interest in Dante, which had begun after unification, and was commemorated in 2002/2003 with all of the 31 original paintings from the competition on display in Florence.

Since I had thus far dedicated my art history studies in Florence to traditional Renaissance art, I was completely overwhelmed when I stepped into the Marino Marini museum, which hosted the exhibition. Inaugurated in 1988, the Marini museum was the first Florentine museum of modern art and it occupies the former church San Pancrazio, whose origins date back to early Christianity. Upon entering, I was totally in awe. The juxtaposition of profane modern art and the building's symbolic Christian architecture, with its slender columns, high-domed ceiling and light-filled galleries, constantly exuded an air of creative inspiration and well-balanced transformation. There could not have been a better place for this exhibition, since the museum's outer physiognomy (an ancient place of

worship transformed into a temple of modern art) perfectly suited the transformation of a canonised literary source into contemporary visual art. Little did I know how fateful this first Dantean encounter would prove to be for my later studies. However, I could immediately sense the inherent cultural and artistic value of the pictures on display. The visual adaptations of scenes and cantos of the *Divine Comedy* alongside portrays of Dante fashioned in a late-Romantic style opened my eyes to the inspirational transgression of artistic means of expression, the cultural codification of visual images, and the fruitful exchange of literary and medial sources.

During my stay in Pisa and Florence, I acquainted myself with all of Dante's works, studying under the tutelage of the renowned chair of the *Filologia Dantesca*, which at the time was held by the late Prof Leonella Coglievina. This chair, the pride of the University of Florence and a unique international position, is dedicated solely to the exploration of Dante's life and works and collaborates closely with the Biblioteca Dantesca, the largest library on Dante which is adjacent to Orsanmichele in the very heart of Florence. On the whole, the instruction, the input and the ideas gleaned during that time and during my many research trips to Florence since then have been most pertinent to my doctoral thesis and formed the architectural groundwork on which I would eventually construct this study. Adding the finishing touches to this publication in the city where it was inspired therefore fills me with pride and gratitude.

Florence, July 2016

INTRODUCTION

DANTE ALIGHIERI:
A LITERARY AUTHORITY
AND HIS CULTURAL CAPITAL

"Who is Dante? What is the *Comedy*? What curious sensation of novelty does one feel when trying to explain in short what the *Divine Comedy* is about?"[1] These are the words used by the first-person narrator in Primo Levi's book *Se questo è un uomo* to explain Dante's major work to Jean, a young Frenchman he encounters in a German concentration camp during the Second World War. In Levi's account, the memory of Dante and his work symbolises an act of human endeavour to restore Occidental culture in a place of Fascist barbarism; to remember acts of creative accomplishment in a place of total destruction; to recall one's own name and one's own history by looking at Dante's way of assigning a place for everyone in the hereafter. Depicting Dante therefore functions as the mechanism of retrieval of human existence. However, Levi's use of Dante serves as a means of pursuing a far from usual and indeed quite remarkable end. Nonetheless, in the short passage quoted above, a number of questions arise, which are highly significant for our reception of Dante today: Is Dante still relevant? What does he stand for? How have his reputation and his appropriation changed over the centuries? Ultimately, why do we still read the *Divina Commedia* and celebrate its author?

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[1] Primo Levi, *Se questo è un uomo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), p. 101. ["Chi è Dante? Che cosa è la *Commedia*? Quale sensazione curiosa di novità si prova, se si cerca di spiegare in breve che cosa è la *Divina Commedia*?"].Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian, French, Latin and German are mine. Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* is quoted from the following editions: *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 2nd edition, 4 vols (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994), and *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum (London: Everyman's Library, 1995).

This book examines key stages of Dante's appropriation in the course of Western cultural history by exploring the intermedial relationship between Dante's *Divina Commedia*, the tradition of his iconography, and selected historical, literary and artistic responses from British artists in the 19th and 20th centuries. At the heart of this study lies the premise that Dante and his work are widespread and have acquired a certain status, which – in sociological terms - has been defined as 'cultural capital' by Pierre Bourdieu. I will argue that the many visualisations and visual images of Dante contributed to the creation of a universal icon of authority and authenticity, which has the capacity to acquire, store and transform "symbolically valued cultural accoutrements and attitudes" in various epochs.[2] In particular, in the 19th and 20th centuries, at a time of incremental geographical and socio-political dislocation, Dante became a symbol of moral integrity and literary authority. The British responses discussed in this analysis draw heavily on the manifold historical (self-) constructions of Dante and their productive evolution. Therefore, the supposition is that the visualisations of Dante and his text are "works [which] only become what they are because their being is a process of becoming", and consequently, "they are [...] dependent on forms which their process [of productive evolution] crystallizes: interpretation, commentary, and critique".[3] This analysis seeks to show that in Dante's case, such a process of crystallisation comprises acts of intermedial transformation and visual appropriation. It is only the continuous practice of reassessment and reinterpretation that ultimately mines the so-called "truth content" of works of art, to borrow a term introduced by Theodor W. Adorno.[4] By analysing the productive evolution of Dante and his work we will, therefore, shed light on the inherent capacity of works of art to acquire, store and transform their cultural capital, and understand the respective intermedial, literary and visual means constitutive of their emergence and evolution.

I am quite aware of the fact that writing about Dante is akin to staging a well-known play: You had better provide a new and fresh interpretation, otherwise you inevitably run the risk of being booed and having your work slated. Given the large volume of Dante publications

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[2] Michael Grenfell and Cheryl Hardy, *Art Rules – Pierre Bourdieu and the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 30.
[3] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 194.
[4] Loc. cit.

produced each year, it is clear that Dante still features among the most researched poets, which significantly impedes scientific innovation. However, the greater the cultural and historical gap between Dante's age and our own, the more need arises to interpret Dante and his world for our times. "People can't seem to let go of the *Divine Comedy*", writes Joan Acocella in *The New Yorker*.[5] Stressing the paramount cultural importance of Dante's work, she poignantly concludes that "the *Divine Comedy* is more than a text that professors feel has to be brushed up periodically for students. It's one of the reasons there *are* professors and students" in the first place.[6] Interestingly, the poet's Christian name *Durante* - which denotes 'enduring' and became shortened to Dante - already hints at his cultural longevity and, with the benefit of hindsight, functions as an omen of eternal literary success.

Dante Alighieri has often been called a unique medieval author who truly grasped the knowledge of his world, tantamount to William Shakespeare, who incorporated the knowledge of his time into his plays. Consequently, "Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third", as T. S. Eliot confirms in his essay on the Florentine poet.[7] Dante's all-encompassing architectural approach to divide the medieval world into Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, similar to the construction of a Gothic cathedral, made his poem a monolithic cultural artefact, which has stood the test of time and conjured up a variety of responses over the last centuries. Interestingly, the reception of Dante and his work represents a remarkably discontinuous process: adulation and rejection were constantly alternating, particularly in the first 400 years of his appropriation. The interpretations of his work and the Dantean image were also subject to significant changes, with different aspects of his vast political and literary œuvre or one of his presumably characteristic traits retreating to the background or moving to the foreground according to an era's taste and preferences. Steve Ellis hints at the fact that there are indeed two Dantes, "the Aristotelian one of the secular world, with his concern for the ordering of human society on earth, and the Dante who

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[5] Joan Acocella, '*What the hell* - Dante in translation and in Dan Brown's new novel', in: *The New Yorker,* May 27 (2013), pp. 82-5, p. 82. For Dan Brown's *Inferno* and his use of Dante see also *Secrets of Inferno - In the footsteps of Dante and Dan Brown*, ed. by Dan Burstein and Arne de Keijzer (Stamford: The Story Plant, 2013).

[6] Acocella, '*What the hell* - Dante in translation and in Dan Brown's new novel', p. 82.

[7] Thomas Stearns Eliot, *Dante* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 46.

presents his Catholic visions of eternity".[8] Such a multitudinous variety of themes addressed in his works, of course, opened up a huge number of sometimes fiercely opposing interpretations. As late as the 19th century, for example, within fifteen years, two critical works on Dante were published in Paris, one celebrating him as a revolutionary socialist and heretic, while the other one praised his Catholic ethics.[9]

Throughout the year 2015, Dante Alighieri's 750th anniversary of his birth was being celebrated, thus commemorating the father of Italian poetry, the avenger of political crimes, the doomed and exiled wanderer and the symbol of Italy's unification, to name but a few of the associations that his name conjures up. From the onset, he was regarded as a highly political author, whose views and convictions were apt to speak for more than one cause. As a result, Dante and his work were repeatedly bound by the political, linguistic or cultural yoke, which inevitably transformed the way Dante and his work were perceived. He has become a universal cultural icon deeply engrained in the world's cultural memory - albeit only after being rid of much of the cultural and political weight his controversial writings contained in the first place. Much of what Dante is renowned and remembered for dates back to the days of Italy's unification in 1861, when the Florentine's legacy was enlisted to support the national cause of providing a foil upon which the newly-formed nation could project itself: having been repeatedly denounced for the supposed sectionalism and factionalism in his works, he was now rediscovered as the forefather of a united Italy, even though Dante was a Republican at heart, who lamented the decline of the Roman Empire and advocated the separation of powers between the Emperor and the Pope.

The 150th anniversary of Italian unification (1861-2011) was celebrated with a huge exhibition entitled *Dante Vittorioso* at the Italian National Library, which once again underlined Dante's political prevision and his cultural longevity.[10] Harking back to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, Albert Russell Ascoli points out that "no work is more

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[8] Steve Ellis, *Dante and English poetry - Shelley to T. S. Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 244.
[9] The two publications under discussion are Antoine Ozanam, *Dante et la philosophie catholique au treizième siècle*, published in 1839, and Eugène Aroux, *Dante hérétique, révolutionnaire et socialiste: Révélations d'un Catholique sur le Moyen Age*, published in 1854.
[10] For the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, see *Dante Vittorioso: Il mito di Dante nell'Ottocento*, ed. by Eugenia Querci (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 2011).

central to the Western canon and the educational and cultural apparatus that still actively propounds it; [...] no author possesses more cultural capital".[11] In Dante's case, the currency of his cultural capital is based on his literary prestige and his firmly established position as an acknowledged authority. In fact, Dante seems to be more popular now than ever, with Roberto Benigni's lectures on Dante filling stadiums around the world, his likeness adorning computer games, his figure surfacing in contemporary Italian telecommunication adverts - and even his death mask vexing the protagonists of Dan Brown's recently published novel, *Inferno*.[12] However, Dante himself understood the fickleness and ephemeral nature of earthly fame and compared the futility of human endeavour to a gust of wind in a famous passage from Purgatorio:

> Oh vana gloria de l'umane posse! [...]
> Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato
> di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,
> e muta nome perché muta lato.

> O empty glory of the power of humans! [...]
> Worldly renown is nothing other than
> a breath of wind that blows now here, now there,
> and changes name when it has changed its course. [*Purg. XI*, 91, 100-2]

In Dante's case, the wind has changed its course several times in the history of his appropriation. His name, however, has never fallen into oblivion. As already mentioned in passing, this study, therefore, promotes the view that Dante's earthly fame has not been blown away by the changing course of the winds - not only because of his poetic quality and literary authority, but also because of the manifold iconographic and visual

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[11] Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.
[12] The Italian actor and director Roberto Benigni toured with his show *Tutto Dante* in Europe, the United States, Canada and South America from 2006 to 2013, interpreting and reciting selected passages of the *Divina Commedia*. He also published a set of DVDs and a book on Dante. See Roberto Benigni, *Il mio Dante* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008). Electronic Arts published the video game *Dante's Inferno* in 2010, which was loosely inspired by Dante's journey through hell. In 2012, an advert for the Italian telecommunication company TIM featured Dante, Virgil and Beatrice and was broadcast throughout Italy. Dan Brown's novel *Inferno* was published in 2013 and will be adapted for the screen in 2016. The story largely takes place in Florence and extensively uses themes taken from the *Divina Commedia*.

manifestations of work and author, which have secured his cultural longevity.

The title *Depicting Dante*, therefore, carries a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to the many visualisations of Dante in European cultural history, ranging from the first illuminated manuscripts to the manifold Dante portraits, which carry a fair share of responsibility for turning Dante into a supranational cultural icon. I want to show how Dante's mental and visual images were being created in the first 200 years of his reception and how these images became productive in British visual and literary art as well as in literary criticism in later epochs.[13] Simon A. Gilson has already observed that

> perhaps the least studied area of Dante's reception in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence concerns the ways he was represented in visual arts, which also reached a very wide audience. Dante's presence here offers a rich field of study that includes portraits, sculpture, manuscript illumination, and printed illustrations.[14]

In the same vein, when studying several portraits of Dante, the former director of the Warburg Institute, Ernst H. Gombrich, had already found that

> [...] the illuminated codices of the *Divine Comedy* [...] do not at first confront us with the Dante of our imagination, clad in red with his familiar head coverings and his gaunt profile, but by the fifteenth century at the latest, illustrators tended to adopt it, as Botticelli did in his memorable drawings.[15]

Therefore, the study of Dante's largely unexplored iconography in the first 200 years of his appropriation remains a promising area of research, which chapter III of this analysis sets out to address. Interestingly, these early Florentine mental and visual images of Dante had astounding repercussions on his reception in later centuries. The visualisations stripped Dante of most of his philosophical and political concerns and created a unique allegory of literary authority and moral authenticity, which - as will be

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[13] The terms *mental* and *visual images* go back to W.J.T. Mitchell's taxonomy of images and will be defined for our purpose in chapter II.2 of this analysis.
[14] Simon A. Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 12.
[15] Ernst H. Gombrich, 'Giotto's Portrait of Dante?', in: *Burlington Magazine*, Issue 121 (1979), pp. 471-83, p. 471.

shown - still functions adequately in the 19th and 20th centuries. On the other hand, the title alludes to the second main goal of this study: making visible the process through which Dante became a vital part of Italy's and Britain's cultural histories. The term 'Dante' thereby serves as a metonym or, to be precise, a pars pro toto, which denotes not only the historical Dante and his work, but also Dante's innovations, notably the three famous figures of Inferno, Count Ugolino and the two fateful lovers Paolo and Francesca. These Dantean images have proven to be subversive in the sense that they have the capacity to acquire, store and transform meaning and more than once they have held the key to unlocking the cultural discourse of their respective times.

Thus, whilst this analysis is concerned with elucidating historically-specific appropriations of Dante and his productive usage in Britain, it is, for the most part, also dependent on the following interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks: intermedial and intertextual structuralist theory, visual methodology, Cultural Memory Studies and the sociological and cultural approaches subsumed under the superordinate concept of New Historicism theory. In accordance with these goals, the trajectory established in this study can be divided into three separate sections: 1) Theory and Methodology: chapters I and II present the above-mentioned theoretical concepts and elaborate on their underlying methodology; 2) History: chapter III traces the emergence of Dante's mental images based on Giovanni Boccaccio's and Leonardo Bruni's historiograms, and his visual images made up of pertinent pathos formulae in Florence in the first 200 years of his reception; and, last but not least, 3) Productive Usage: chapters IV, V, and VI explore the evolution of Dantean images in British visual and literary art as well as in literary criticism.

In particular, in the third section of this analysis, it will be shown that Britain assumes a key role in the process of turning Dante into a supranational icon. Not only has the appropriation of Dante's work undergone a considerable degree of transformation, integration and modification by British artists, but the Florentine poet himself has also been subject to a complex process of mystification, notably in the 18th and 19th centuries. Interestingly, Dante's reappraisal in Britain was sparked by a change of artistic medium, once Sir Joshua Reynolds increased Dante's

fame by reinterpreting the Ugolino passage on canvas.[16] Thus, this analysis presents the notion of sustaining cultural longevity through intermediality, and, therefore, explores the British socio-cultural circumstances which favoured such a transition from written to visual cultural constructs: the rise of aesthetics as a driving social force in the 18th century, propagated by Thomas Hoby's seminal translation of Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, Sir Jonathan Richardson's *Two Discourses promoting the science of connoisseurship*, as well as the tradition of the grand tour, which inevitably enhanced the British appreciation for everything Italian. All of these cultural phenomena provided a fertile soil on which Dante's reappraisal could prosper in the 19th century and, to a lesser extent, in the 20th century.

Furthermore, as this study will show, the mental and visual images created out of Dantean appropriations almost always circle around the triad of allegory, authority and authenticity. These three important aspects of revisiting Dante are found in the Dantean image fostered in Florence in the 14th and 15th centuries and feature prominently in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, T. S. Eliot and Tom Phillips. The selection of these three artists might seem arbitrary and far-fetched at first glance, but it was governed by their contribution to the appropriation of the Florentine in Britain, and the totality with which they embraced his work. Not only did they study and publish on Dante, but their own artistic and literary production was also profoundly influenced by Dante's oeuvre, as I will demonstrate.

Thus, I hope to shed light on both the intricate relationship between these artists and their cultural debts owed to Dante as well as on the remarkable continuity of Dantean appropriation by artists and intellectuals, particularly in Britain from the middle of the 19th century onwards. Therefore, I have chosen one artist from each of the distinctive artistic eras commonly referred to as Victorian, modern and postmodern. Their appropriation of Dante represents landmarks in the productive reception of the Florentine and is invariably linked to a tradition of Dante studies that was established in Britain during the middle of the 19th century by Gabriele Rossetti, who held a chair in Italian studies at King's

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[16] Sir Joshua Reynolds' depiction of Count Ugolino, executed in 1773 and exhibited at the Royal Academy of Art, represents the first seminal transformation of a Dantean theme onto canvas and spurred a huge number of artists embracing Dantean subjects in Britain in the 19th century.

College in London. For his son, Dante Gabriel, the Florentine provides a model for Victorian Dantean self-fashioning and becomes an allegory of authenticity and morality. For T. S. Eliot, Dante represents the voice of literary authority in Modernist poetry and serves as the allegory of a visionary European author. Furthermore, Dante provides Eliot with the wisdom of allegory as a universal rhetorical device, which Eliot emulated and propagated in his own literary work. For Tom Phillips, the engagement with Dante and his text represents an intertextual and intermedial endeavour, which paves the way for his own highly personalized and individualistic formal and artistic appropriation of Dante, and provides him with a rich cultural tapestry of art, thought and ideas on the Western world. Furthermore, his meta-discourse on Dante is the starting point for his postmodern critique of the economic exploitation of cultural icons.

The selection of material for this study does not follow a strictly diachronic pattern. Portraying all of Dante's images and *Commedia*-inspired artefacts in a diachronic way would represent a Mnemosyne project along the lines of Aby Warburg and, albeit desirable, would extend beyond the scope of this publication. What this study will do, however, is suggest how Dante's image was fixed in the first 200 years of his appropriation in Florence, how fruitfully the Dantean images and his text have been taken up and used for creative and intellectual production in Britain over the course of the past centuries, and what moral, literary, or political messages they continue to convey. Reformulating and modifying Levi's introductory quote this book, therefore, poses similar questions, such as: Which different kind of roles did Dante play in the course of cultural history? How have our views on Dante and his work been transformed? Which socio-cultural circumstances favoured his appreciation in Britain? In what way have his original ideas been transformed by British artists and intellectuals? Finally, what were the implications for the change of medium on Dante's reception?

CHAPTER I

ANALYSING DANTE

I.1 A Short History of Dante Studies

I.1.1 General strands of Dante criticism in Italy

Dante and his *Divina Commedia* represent a monolithic cultural artefact, which has stood the test of time. Without any doubt, no other work in the Western corpus has accrued a comparable amount of cultural capital or literary authority, which Ascoli defines using Bourdieu's parameters as having a "widely-acknowledged cultural prestige and ideological weight".[1] However, in the course of the last 700 years the critical responses to his texts have been as manifold as the themes treated in Dante's vast oeuvre.[2] This chapter aims to trace the general strands of reception in Italy and Britain from the earliest responses to Dante's work to the early 20th century in order to provide historical context for the intermedial and visual analyses of the artists and their works that will be discussed in chapters III-VI. Inevitably, such a preliminary survey requires a number of simplifications to be made, and it is acknowledged that the history of Dante's reception is a far more complex matter than the general strands indicated here, with different phases of reception overlapping and influencing each other.[3]

Bearing these restrictions in mind, it can be stated that since the very beginning of Dante criticism in Italy in the 14th century, immediately

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[1] Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*, p. 3
[2] For a chronological overview of Dante criticism, see Aldo Vallone, *Storia della critica dantesca dal XIV al XX secolo*, 4 vols. (Rome: F. Vallardi, 1981), and Michael Caesar, *Dante – The Critical Heritage 1314 (?) – 1870* (London: Routledge, 1989).
[3] To complicate matters even further, Dante himself critically assesses his major works and reveals a tendency to auto-referentiality in his texts. This will be discussed separately in chapter III.1.1.

following Dante's death in 1321, theological questions influenced his reception, for example, the meaning of the allegorical figure of Beatrice in his *Vita Nuova* and the *Divina Commedia*.[4] Dante's literary authority was highly debated, since he approached theology as a layman and infused poetry with philosophical and scholastic questions in the Italian vernacular.[5] Towards the end of his literary career, Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375) launched the tradition of public Dante lectures in Florence, where he recited and expounded certain cantos of Dante's major work, thus fixing and enhancing Dante's public image at the time.[6] While mystifying Dante and his monumental work he also considered him a "poet theologian, whose art was able to probe major philosophical questions as well as treatises on theology or the interpretation of Scripture",[7] thereby greatly enhancing his literary authority and his cultural sphere of influence.

In the second half of the 14th, and in the beginning of the 15th, century, the humanists focused on the linguistic qualities of Dante's text and considered it "the first configuration of humanist poetics".[8] Dante was seen as a protohumanist avant la lettre, whose works centred around the inspirational and rhetorical capacities of man. During the High Renaissance he was enlisted for the national cause and his political endeavours moved to the foreground. Due to his military commitment in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289 (one of the few established facts about Dante's life) Lorenzo de' Medici and Cristoforo Landino saw him as a shining example of Florentine patriotism and considered the poet and his work to be "pillars of Florentine civic identity".[9] Landino, who provided one of the most influential comments on the *Divina Commedia*, argued that

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[4] Caesar, *Dante - The Critical Heritage*, p. 7.

[5] For the difficulties in defining the term *authority* as it applied in Dante's time, see chapter III.1.1.

[6] Boccaccio's pervasive influence on Dante's public image in the 14th century and on Dante's subsequent reception will be discussed in chapter III.1.2 of this study.

[7] David Lummus, 'Dante's Inferno: Critical Reception and Influence', in: *Critical Insights: Dante's 'Inferno'*, ed. by Patrick Hunt (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2011), pp. 63-81, p. 65.

[8] Concetta Carestia Greenfield, *Humanist and Scholastic Poetics, 1250 - 1500* (London: Associated University Press, 1981), p. 74.

[9] Lummus, 'Dante's Inferno: Critical Reception and Influence', p. 66. See also Caesar, *Dante - The Critical Heritage*, pp.19-21, and Vallone, *Storia della critica dantesca*, vol.1, p. 194.

> [Dante] neither lacked spirit nor strength in his military discipline, because he often took part in battle; it was in the most dangerous battle of Campaldino [...] that he gained honour for his brave fighting and proved himself useful for his hometown.[10]

Landino also elaborated on a Neoplatonic interpretation of Dante's journey to the hereafter and read it as "a metaphor for the return of the soul to its maker".[11] He favourably mentioned Dante's distancing of himself from the then governors of Florence, an indispensable prerequisite for his later major work.[12] Furthermore, Landino's commentary on the *Divina Commedia* was published in the first Florentine edition of the poem in 1481 alongside Sandro Botticelli's illustrations, which once again underlined Dante's status as a literary and cultural authority in his hometown and was therefore used as part of the Medici's propaganda to turn Florence into a centre of culture to rival ancient Athens and Rome.[13]

During the debates on the *Questione della lingua*, the quest for an authoritative linguistic model for Italy, Pietro Bembo, "whose particular achievement [was] to assert and successfully defend the prestige of vernacular writing alongside writing in Latin",[14] argued against the use of Dante's Florentine-based vernacular while Giangiorgio Trissino was in

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[10] Cristoforo Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia - Edizione nazionale dei commenti danteschi 28*, 4 vols. (Rome: Edizione nazionale, 2001), vol. 1, p. 249. ["Né gli [Dante] mancò l'animo né lle [sic] forze nella disciplina militare, perché spesse volte si trovò in guerra; et nella pericolosissima battaglia di Campaldino, [...], virilmente combattendo honore ad sé et utile alla patria partorì."].

[11] Lummus, 'Dante's Inferno: Critical Reception and Influence', p. 66.

[12] Landino, *Comento sopra la Comedia*, vol. 1, p. 223. See also chapter III.1.1 of this analysis.

[13] On the commentary tradition of the *Divina Commedia,* see Robert Hollander, 'Dante and his commentators', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 226-36, and Deborah Parker, 'Interpreting the Commentary Tradition to the *Comedy*', in: *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 240-58. Landino's pervasive influence on the commentary tradition is discussed in Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence*, pp. 163-93. For Botticelli's *Commedia* illustrations, see *Sandro Botticelli: The Drawings for Dante's Divine Comedy,* ed. by Hein-Thomas Schulze Altcappenberg (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2000).

[14] Caesar, *Dante - The Critical Heritage*, p. 229.

favour of it.[15] This debate continued well into the 19th century, when authors like Alessandro Manzoni modelled their literary vocabulary after Dante's linguistic example and thereby ensured his cultural and linguistic longevity, emphasising the prestige of the Florentine vernacular.[16] While the first three hundred years of Dante's reception in Italy were marked by intricate questions of theology and cultural authority, the 18th and 19th centuries focused on the critical dualism of biography and philology.[17] Literary critics and writers such as Giambattista Vico (in the 18th century) and Francesco de Sanctis (in the 19th century) saw Dante as a consummate "poet of the sublime",[18] whose work testified to his genius. Around the same time that de Sanctis published his *Storia della letteratura italiana* in the middle of the 19th century, Dante's political appropriation as well as his international reappraisal had reached its climax: in a deliberate act of national reverence, Dante was celebrated as the father of Italian unification.[19] De Sanctis had already paved the way for a patriotic reading of Dante when he interpreted literature not as a "document but as the very essence of national history", in which "Dante's position is supreme", since he represents "the first great, truly complete poet produced by Italy".[20] In the same vein, in 1851, the political philosopher Vincenzo Gioberti posed the rhetorical question "whose doctrine and genius displayed in his work was more aristocratic than Dante's?", and stated, with the historical Dante in mind, that "the repeatedly instilled and deeply rooted ideas go to form

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[15] See Pietro Bembo, *Prose e rime*, ed. by Carlo Dionisotti (Classici italiani 26, Turin 1960), p. 138. and Guiseppe Tavani, *Dante nel Seicento - Saggi su A. Guarini, N. Villani, L. Magalotti* (Florence: Biblioteca dell'"Archivium Romanicum", 1976), pp. 13-36. On the emergence and ramification of the Italian *Questione della lingua,* see also Angelo Mazzocco, *Linguistic Theories in Dante and the Humanists: Studies of Language and Intellectual History in Late Medieval and Early Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1993), pp. 24-50.

[16] Steven Botterill contends that the authority of the language of poetry "may even be seen as the central concern of Dante's literary career". See Steven Botterill, 'Dante and the Authority of Poetic Language', in: *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, pp. 167-80, p. 167.

[17] For Dante's critical reception in the 19th century, see *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Aida Audeh and Nicholas Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[18] Caesar, *Dante - The Critical Heritage*, p. 45.

[19] Dante's own political convictions and the difficulties involved in the mere biographical interpretation of his work will be discussed in chapter III.1.1.

[20] Caesar, *Dante - The Critical Heritage*, p. 625.

the customs, [however], the politicians of today lack political education".[21] Similarly, the politician Giuseppe Mazzini reminded the Italians that "the first step to produce great minds consists in honouring the already deceased", praising Dante in his essay *Dell'amor patrio di Dante* as the very epitome of a national poet.[22] All of these writings helped create the iconic Dante, who became the divinely ordained promoter of Italy's art and culture, since according to the prevailing Dante criticism at the time, "God's creation of Dante and the creation of Italian art coincide".[23]

       19th-century historiography must be regarded as highly ideological, since "it takes the characteristic form of its discourse, the narrative, as a content, namely, narrativity, and treats 'narrativity' as an essence shared by both [ideological and historical] discourses".[24] Dante's life and work, therefore, was written into the Italian narrative of a unified Italian state and Dante's own path of life as a crisis-ridden exiled poetic genius forms the narrative template for the formerly disunited and, on a European scale, largely disdained peninsula. Such a political and cultural appropriation of Dante also found its expression in the popular Dante festivals surrounding Italy's unification and culminated in the festivities of the 600th anniversary of Dante's birth and the erection of Dante statues in Florence, Verona,

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[21] Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del rinnovamento civile d'Italia*, ed. by Luigi Quattrocchi (Rome: Abete, 1969), p. 397. ["Chi fu più aristocratico in opera di dottrina e d'ingegno che Dante? Le idee ripetute, inculcate, radicate, formano i costumi. [...] Oggi gli uomini politici non hanno educazione politica."].

[22] Giuseppe Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti* (Imola: Paolo Galeati, 1906), p. 22. ["Il primo passo a produrre uomini grandi sta nell'onorare i già spenti."]. On Mazzini's political appropriation of Dante see also Luigi Mascilli Migliorini, *Il mito dell'eroe - Italia e Francia nell'età della Restaurazione* (Napoli: Guida, 2003), pp. 164-7. On the construction of the historical Dante as the mythical visionary of the Italian unification see Thies Schulze, *Dante Alighieri als nationales Symbol Italiens 1793-1915* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2005), Stefano Jossa, 'Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity', in: *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century,* pp. 30-5, and *Dante and Milton - Envisioned visionaries*, ed. by Christoph Lehner and Christoph Singer (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

[23] Mazzini, *Scritti editi ed inediti,* p. 325. ["Dio crea Dante e l'arte italiana ad un tempo."]. The exhibition *Dante Vittorioso: Il mito di Dante nell'Ottocento* on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Italy's unification in 2011 emphasised once more such a reading of the mythical figure of Dante and highlighted the Florentine's enormous political and cultural relevance for the present day.

[24] Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 30.