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ITAL 262 A: Dantes Divine Comedy

11 March 2022

The Illumination of Dantes Divine Comedy Through Gustave Doré.

Dante's Divine Comedy is a three-part poem written in the 14th century by Dante Alighieri. The poems are a self-insert journey through Hell, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, meant to serve as social and political commentary on his hometown, Florence, Italy. The poems start with Dante the character being led by ancient Roman poet, Virgil, through the nine circles of Hell. Each circle represents its own sin. As the poets reach Purgatorio, Virgil continues to guide Dante up Mount Purgatory, where Dante learns of God's love and is purified of sins before reaching Paradiso. During Paradiso, Dante ascends through heaven with his late love, Beatrice. The series of poems are recognized today as one of the greatest works of literature. The Divine Comedy has held a considerable influence on culture, art, and other creations since its development in the 1300s. One inspired artist, Paul Gustave Doré, illustrations for these poems have shaped the way humanity views Dante's Divine Comedy and strengthens the imagery, emotion, and allegories Dante portrayed through the text. Doré was a French artist born in 1832. The website called Florence Inferno explains best, "Doré is considered one of the most successful book illustrators of the late nineteenth century, whose exuberant and bizarre fantasy created vast dreamlike scenes..." (Florence Inferno).

Doré's illustrations for the Divine Comedy began in 1861, starting with Dante's Inferno for the first section of a series he titled "Chefs-d'oeuvre de la Littérature," meaning the

“masterpieces of literature.” This series featured illustrations from other great poets as well, such as Homer, Ossian, Byron, Goethe, Racine, and Corneille (The World of Dante). The other parts of the series did not receive nearly as much recognition as did his portion for Dante. Doré first hit difficulty in finding a publisher that would release his illustrated edition of Dante’s Inferno, and so he decided to self-finance the project.

Doré's illustration brought immediate success to himself, and more attention to Dante’s Divine Comedy in France. Aida Audeh, a professor of art history at Hamline University writes, “While France's initial interest in Dante was confined to the episodes of Paolo and Francesca (Inf.5) and Ugolino (Inf.33), the 19th century saw an expansion of interest in Dante's work which resulted in numerous translations of the Commedia into French, critical studies, newspapers, and specialized journals, and over 200 works of painting and sculpture between 1800-1930” (The World of Dante). Because of the immediate success Doré found with his illustration in Dante’s Inferno, the French publisher Hachette published both Purgatorio and Paradiso illustrations in 1868 within a single volume (Florence Inferno). Florence Inferno says, “Subsequently, Doré’s Dante illustrations appeared in roughly 200 editions, with translations from the poet’s original Italian available in multiple languages” (Florence Inferno.) Doré’s illustrations are now widely recognized as the closest and most accurate visualizations for Dante’s Divine Comedy.

A compelling component of Gustave Doré’s art was its roots in Romanticism. Romanticism found its importance as being the first literary and artistic movement in America. This movement focused specifically on giving voice to common man. Doré’s work for Dante’s Divine Comedy with the twist of Romanticism created a new perspective for readers. Early illustrations accompanying Dante’s work were often simplified. Doré’s art, on the other hand, creates close associations with Dante and Virgil as characters, and exemplifies the nature/

surroundings of the given scene. Doré's art is distinguishable by the amount of detail possessed in each illustration. For example, look at Doré's design for Purgatorio, canto 4. The illustration reflects the quote "We through the broken rock ascended, close / Pent on each side, while underneath the ground / Ask'd help of hands and feet. When we arriv'd / Near on the highest ridge of the steep bank, / Where the plain level open'd I exclaim'd, / 'O master! say which way can we proceed?'" (Purgatorio Canto 4, Lines 30-35). In comparison, a medieval illustration presented by Teodolinda Barolini from the same canto and quote (Digital Dante). The two illustrations differ drastically, as the medieval dated drawing is extremely simplified, and Doré's illustration is realistic and detailed. The drawing by Doré also captures much more of the nature surrounding Dante and Virgil as they climb. The romantic aspects of Doré's art perfectly capture the sensibility of Dante's Divine Comedy. The detail in Doré's illustration allows for a more fluid take on the expressions Dante and Virgil have, compared to the medieval piece. In the medieval piece, the two poets can be seen with neutral expression, only enough detail in the face to distinguish which character they are. As the text continues in Purgatorio, Canto 4, Dante wrote, "The climb had sapped my last strength when I cried: / "Sweet Father, turn to me: unless you pause / I shall be left here on the mountainside!" / He pointed to a ledge a little ahead / that wound around the whole face of the slope. / "Pull yourself that much higher, my son," he said. / His words so spurred me that I forced myself / to push on after him on hands and knees / until at last my feet were on that shelf" (Purgatorio Canto 4, Lines 42-49). In Doré's illustration, Dante the character looks behind himself and down to Virgil for reassurance. One can view the fear in Dante's posture, unsure where to continue next. As one looks down to Virgil, there is confidence in his pose. He is even seen demonstrating *contrapposto*, a stance often used by artists where one leg is sturdy to support the other leg. This pose is used by artists to suggest relaxation and

calmness. By using these elements, Doré is exemplifying Dante's fears, while showing the relaxed yet confident reassurance Virgil will provide Dante.

Although many artists took inspiration from Doré, some were inspired specifically by his collection for the Divine Comedy. Salvador Dalí, for example, took a new approach on illustrating Dante's poems and used elements from Doré's art. Dalí was a Spanish surrealist artist who was best known for his technical skill and precision. In 1963, Dalí's watercolor pieces were published in a version of the Divine Comedy after he was commissioned by the Italian government (Cornell University Library). As Dalí took a surrealistic approach on the Comedy, he gathered inspiration from much more than just the text. He used elements from other creators, such as William Blake and Doré. For example, The Dalí illustration for Purgatorio 12 takes the same perspective and depiction of Arachne as in Doré's art for the same canto. This shows how Doré's illustrations strengthen the text while accompanied with it, providing the viewer/reader with an extra layer of visualization and interpretation.

Paul Gustave Doré has shifted and shaped views, recreations, and inspiration from Dantes Divine Comedy throughout history. The illustrations allow readers to pull the imagery of hell, as described in Dante's Inferno, and process the information in a new perspective as performed by Doré. The changed perspective can shift the way individuals understand characters (their looks, emotions, value of their sins, and more). This interpretation of characters also leads to the way we view punishment, as the illustrations specifically articulate punishments in a way that halt uncontrolled environmental imagination but bring a general understanding than can further explain symbolism and pathos within Dante's Divine Comedy. Doré's work has also strengthened the way Dante's Divine Comedy is used and viewed as political allegory.

The sixth canto in each part of the *Commedia* holds significant political meaning. Specifically for *Inferno*, Canto 6, Doré's engravings strengthen the political allegories of the text through his skill of preserving character's emotions. Dante makes the true protagonist of Canto 6 of the *Inferno* to be his hometown, Florence, Italy. He does this by connecting Florence to the sin of that canto, gluttony. The website Digital Dante explains, "...Dante moves from literal gluttony to metaphorical gluttony. Thus, from literal gluttony he moves to the lust for wealth and power that is at the root of the factional politics that divide and destroy the city (*Inf.* 6.50)" (Digital Dante.) As Ciaccio, who was damned to hell for gluttony, speaks to Dante, he says, "'Thy city heap'd with envy to the brim, / Ay that the measure overflows its bounds, / Held me in brighter days'" (*Inferno*, Canto 6, Lines 49-51). Doré chose to illustrate these specific lines. Within the engraving, Dante and Virgil are posed above Ciaccio. The other sinners around them twist around in torment. Dante in the illustration is shown with fear, even grasping onto Virgil with hand close to his body to keep slight distance as Ciaccio reaches towards him. Despite the fear, Dante keeps stern eye contact with Ciaccio, looking intrigued and understanding, yet disgusted. Doré chooses to display Dante in a way with this specific line of text for the viewer to get a true observation on the complexity of the situation with Florence, and Dante's true feelings towards the political problems.

When identifying hell as a place while reading Dante's *Inferno*, one's mind is limited to the descriptive elements provided by Dante as the author. When viewing Dante's *Inferno* accompanied by work from Doré's collection "Chefs-d'oeuvre de la Littérature," one's mind is then shifted into viewing Dante's *Inferno* as a specific place. This brings gathered understanding of what hell and certain circles are, and what they look like. Doré made numerous artistic decisions within his work to display different themes, messages, and emotions. In the collection

for Dantes Inferno, Doré used lighting, texture, and perspective to shape the values of a given area. For example, in the engraving made for the Inferno, Canto 1, lines 1 and 2, “In the midway of this our mortal life, / I found me in a gloomy wood, astray” (Inferno, Canto 1, lines 1-2). Here, the textures feature ravenous tangled undergrowth at the bottom of the illustration. In the middle, Dante is encountered with fearful and resigned expressions. This emotion is centralized with specific lighting surrounding his upper body. Surrounding him, are vast and large trees. The deepening and extending darkness brought in the right background of the illustration extends the feeling of lost one extends through character of Dante. Throughout the cantos, the illustrations show punishments and sins in the front, being the first thing the eye catches. Virgil and Dante can be spotted in the background, observing. Doré does this perspective not only to exemplify the main deliverance of each canto (the representative sin), but also to demonstrate the journey and guidance Dante is experiencing. This perspective and illustrations bring the reader closer to Dante as a character, making the reader experience what Dante was experiencing in those moments.

Even when viewing Heaven as a place outside of Dantes Divine Comedy, Doré’s illustrations have shaped modern interpretations. When searching online for “Heaven” or “What is Heaven like?”, Doré’s illustrations for Paradiso are always one of the first images to appear. The lightness and glory associate with Doré’s illustrations are closely associated with how heaven is viewed by Christians today.

In Paradiso, Doré’s illustrations continue to offer a more rounded visualization for the reader. In Paradiso, Canto 31, Dante is shown where God dwells in the Empyrean. Lines 1 through 11 read, “So, in the shape of that white Rose, the holy / legion has shown to me — the host that Christ, / with His own blood, had taken as His bride. / The other host, which, flying,

sees and sings / the glory of the One who draws its love, / and that goodness which granted it such glory, / just like a swarm of bees that, at one moment, / enters the flowers and, at another, turns / back to that labor which yields such sweet savor, / descended into that vast flower graced / with many petals, then again rose up / to the eternal dwelling of its love” (Paradiso, Canto 31, lines 1-11). Dante already does an amazing job at creating a visual scene for the readers here.

With the visualization of the white rose and angels acting as a swarm of bees, one can understand the beauty and complicity taking place in front of Dante’s eyes. The illustration by Doré only strengthens this moment for the reader. Doré simplifies each individual angel in a way where they all blend into one larger object, the rose. He capitalizes on the use of central lighting in the middle of the swarm to reflect light on one side of each angel, creating individualism in the complexity. At the bottom of the illustration, Dante and Beatrice are shown as darker figures. This presents the white rose and swarm of angels to be the forefront and focus of the scene, the lightness in comparison to Dante and Beatrice create and understanding of the clarity and ethereal presence heaven holds.

Another way Doré compliments the text is by preserving emotion within his artwork. Throughout different illustrations, Dante is witnessed showing various forms of emotions, such as pity, hatred, disgust, sadness, surprise, etc.... While reading Dante’s Divine Comedy, it can be easy to overlook Dantes's emotion, especially when under analyzing or not having a particularly well understanding of the literature. Doré’s work allows for a different outlook on the story, guided by the character’s emotions. The story, and Dantes journey becomes completely different when the audience of the text and illustrations understand the emotions he felt while journeying through the different circles of Hell, Mount Purgatory, and the 9 spheres of Heaven. By viewing

Dante's emotions through Doré's art, one can also recognize the significance of political and religious commentaries about Florence, Italy.

Doré's art also inspires a deeper perspective on the characters of the Comedy, compared to the characters depiction in the text alone. Francesca da Polenta and Paolo Malatesta, the two "forbidden lovers" who were damned to hell in the circle of lust are featured within Doré's work. The illustration follows Canto 5, lines 105-106. 'Love brought us to one death. Caina waits / The soul, who spilt our life" (Inferno Canto 5, lines 105-106). These two are arguably the only people Dante felt real pity for throughout the journey of Hell. The illustrations strengthen the love and continuity their relationship holds. The sensual gaze the two lovers hold, and their delicate, nurturing poses featured in the illustrations explain to the viewer why Dante feels the pity he did for the two of them.

Because of the depth that Doré's illustrations add to the original text, many creators will decide to take inspiration from Doré's illustrations for the Divine Comedy, instead of just from the text itself. For example, Doré's illustrations for the Inferno inspired the directors Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe de Ligo and Adolfo Padovan in the 1911 Italian silent film, "L'Inferno." One scene in particular follows Doré's illustration for Canto 28, the lines 116-119, "By the hair / it bore the sever'd member, lantern-wise / Pendent in hand, which look'd at us, and said / Woe's me!" (Inferno, Canto 28, lines 116-119). Just as Doré's work represents, the sinners throughout this silent film are also naked to show they are stripped from their humanness and are only allowed savagery, of which they participated in during their chance of livelihood.

Doré did an excellent job in fortifying the message behind Dante's poem. The messages were so accurate, in fact, that a French critic in 1861 wrote, "we are inclined to believe that the conception and the interpretation come from the same source, that Dante 130 Studies in

Medievalism and Gustave Doré are communicating by occult and solemn conversations the secret of this Hell plowed by their souls, traveled, explored by them in every sense” (Aida Audeh). In shaming the sinners for their various evils to the way Satan is depicted, Dante’s thoroughly contemplated the way he wanted his work to be viewed and interpreted. Doré compliments Dante’s thoughtfulness through the various illustrations. Catherine Viz explains it best, “An author is only as good as any artist that may interpret him and illustrate his work, regardless of how daunting of a task it may seem. Yet for both men, incredible each in their own right, imagery and visual understanding is absolutely crucial to understanding their work as only a sliver of the true emotion that they are portraying in their work” (Clarifying Catholicism). As many volumes of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* have been published accompanied by Doré’s illustrations, the two are intertwined and interpreted interchangeably with one another. Doré’s artwork is recognized as the most associated illustration with Dante’s *Inferno*. Dante does a brilliant job of creating a new perspective of the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, while at the same time fortifying his political/ religious feelings and bestowment towards Florence. Doré strengthens these feelings using different illustrative properties and techniques, especially by fortifying the characters emotions.

Overall, Doré has shaped the way society views and consumes Dante’s *Divine Comedy* throughout history and continues to do so in modern days. His specific use of artistic technique involving lighting, texture, and flow allow for strengthened perspectives following the poem. His art shapes emotion and the way individuals may view characters, especially Dante as a character as him and his guide journey through hell. The artistic renditions also allow for symbolism and the pathos within the poem to be better understood. Both pieces of art, by Dante and Doré share the same story but are best when accompanied by one another. Doré’s illustrations for Dante’s

Inferno shaped and strengthened the culture and influence of Dantes Inferno, and its modern inspirations significantly.

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