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Textual Physiognomy: A New Theory and Brief History of Dantean Portraiture

Joshua Reid

Introduction: Dante's Textual Physiognomy



Fig. 1. Raphael, *Dante (Detail from the Disputa)*, 1509–10. Fresco. Rome, Stanza della Signatura, Vatican Palace. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

It is the Face that has launched a thousand monographs (fig. 1). The Face with the ubiquitous red cap encircled with laurel crown, perched on what e.e. cummings called the “brows of dread renown.”¹ The Face with flinty eyes split by an aquiline nose, disdainful lips carved into lithic jaw and cheekbones. And so often in stark profile, “that hatchet profile that cleaves its way

¹ e. e. cummings, “Great Dante stands in Florence, looking down,” in *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage and Richard S. Kennedy (New York: Liveright, 1991), line 8.

through the centuries with such authority.”²

It is the poet Dante Alighieri’s face. A face famous because of art. A hatchet face that, because of art, has carved its way to almost universal recognition. “Dante is the first person in almost a thousand years,” E.H. Gombrich writes, “whose name immediately evokes a vivid image of his physical presence.”³ Or, as W. B. Yeats writes:

The chief imagination of Christendom,
Dante Alighieri, so utterly found himself
That he has made that hollow face of his
More plain to the mind’s eye than any face
But that of Christ.⁴

René Magritte shows us just how iconic that face is in *Eternity* (fig. 2), where he allows Jesus to share Dante’s marmoreal stage, two faces that will be forever recognizable in eternity’s sculpture gallery.⁵ They are the immutable visages that most effectively provide contrast with the mutable block of butter.

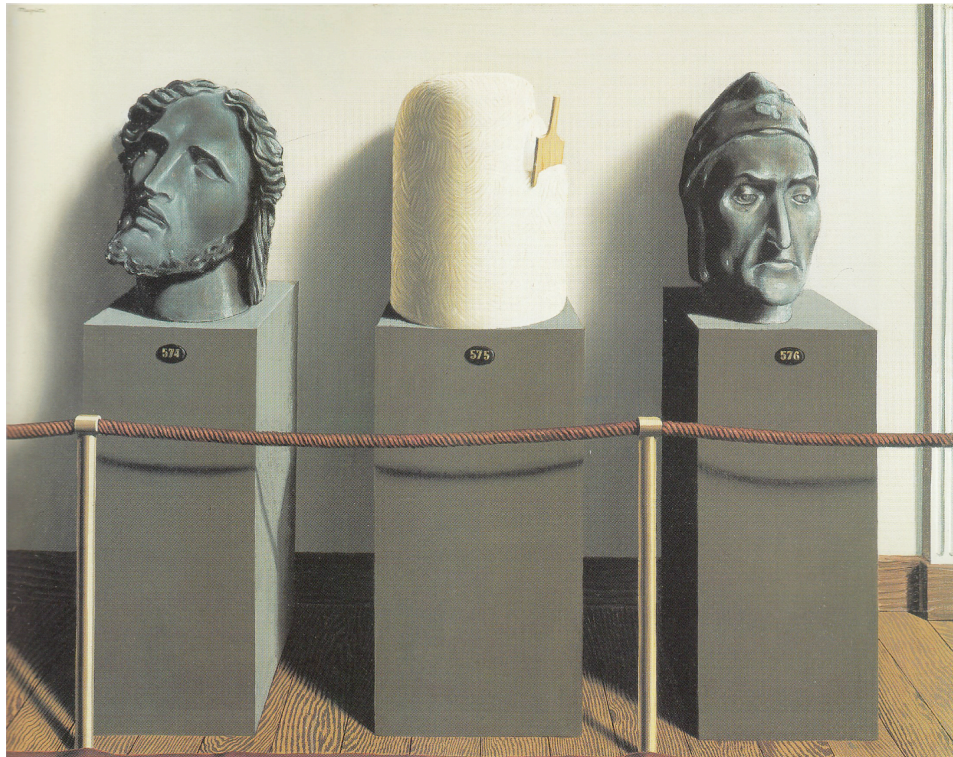


Fig. 2. René Magritte, *Eternity*, 1935. Oil on canvas, 65 x 85 cm (25 ½ x 33 ½ in). Private Collection.
© 2016 C. Herscovici / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: WikiArt.

² David Piper, *The Image of the Poet: British Poets and Their Portraits* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), 110.

³ E. H. Gombrich, “Giotto’s Portrait of Dante?” *The Burlington Magazine* 121, no. 917 (August 1979): 471.

⁴ W. B. Yeats, “Ego Dominus Tuus,” in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), lines 18–22.

⁵ Apparently, only Jesus was good enough to pair with Dante. Magritte originally had planned to use Hercules, but he changed it to Jesus, presumably to find a suitably recognizable face to balance Dante’s pictorial weight.

Dante's portrait is so iconic that he can be immediately conjured by the mere presence of his poetic accoutrements (cap and laurel crown) and the profile outline of that "hatchet" nose, as in Jean Cocteau's 1915 cover of *Le Mot* (fig. 3). Through his visual shorthand, Cocteau presents Dante's portrait as minimalist artwork, statuesque caricature, graphic trace. The ease with which the viewer can recognize Dante by this sketch clearly demonstrates his face's anchored presence in the visual imagination. It also shows, when viewed along with Magritte's bust-Dante, that Dante can be both a clear likeness of an individual (Magritte) and an abstracted allegorical representation of a Poet (Cocteau), simultaneous semiotic potentialities in Dante that make his portraits uniquely significant.



Fig. 3. Jean Cocteau, *Dante avec nous*, front cover of *Le Mot*, 15 June 1915. Pen and ink, applied color, 41 x 28 cm (16 1/8 x 11 in.). Private Collection. The Stapleton Collection. © 2016 ADAGP, Paris / Avec l'aimable autorisation de M. Pierre Bergé, président du Comité Jean Cocteau. Photo: Bridgeman Images.

Dante's image has become a cultural commodity, invested with symbolic and transactional freight. There are few cities and towns in Italy that do not have at least one "Via Dante" or "Piazza Dante" with a bust or statue, part of Italy's contribution to "the widespread glorification of the poet as national icon," when he became "political propaganda for an ideal national unity."⁶ His value for Italy and for Europe in general was minted when his image became the only poet for Italy's version of the €2, the most valuable Euro coin—Dante is not only cultural, but also literal, currency (fig. 4). And the worldwide symbolic and cultural value of Dante's Face continues to increase; few, if any, author portraits emit the same power.



Fig. 4. €2 (*Italian Design*), 2002. Photo: Fleur-de-Coin.

This Dante we have inherited, venerated, and even spent with our currency probably shares little with the actual author, as Dante's value as cultural currency is more due to the propagation of a particular image of Dante than the presentation of a historical Dante. For example, the face on the Euro, unsurprisingly, drew from another iconic Dante representation: Raphael's image of Dante in the *Disputa* (fig. 1). Since Dante's real skull was rediscovered at the end of the 19th century, studies have discovered that no portrait has fleshed him out accurately, most recently via a computer-generated reconstruction of his face based on the dimensions of Dante's skull by researchers at the University of Bologna, who claim that the "classical profile of Dante has been demolished."⁷ But there is little chance that an act of digital iconoclasm will shatter six hundred

⁶ Andrea Ciccarelli, "Dante and the Culture of Risorgimento: Literary, Political or Ideological Icon?" in *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford, UK: Berg Publishers, 2001), 77.

⁷ Malcom Moore, "Scientists Recreate (Less Ugly) Face of Dante," *The Telegraph*, January 12, 2007, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1539300/Scientists-recreate-less-ugly-face-of-Dante.html> (accessed July 10, 2016). For an earlier comparison of Dante's portraits to his skull measurements, see Frank Jewett Mather

years of ossified portrait tradition. The test of authenticity, as Charles Eliot Norton writes when he reacts to an alleged Dante death mask, is the sense of greatness incarnated in the face: “The countenance, moreover, and expression are worthy of Dante.”⁸ Just because it is worthy of Dante, however, doesn’t mean it is Dante; and yet, Norton is right that the death mask has become Dante in a more insuperable way than any digital reconstruction project from Dante’s actual skull ever could.

This essay does not seek to discover the true Dante behind the Face, as so many studies have attempted before it, but rather to understand better how that Face came to be, and, by implication, the relationship of that Face to the way we read his texts and understand his legacy.⁹ The following two images—Tom Phillips’s frontispiece to his edition of the *Inferno* (1985; fig. 5) and Jean Cocteau’s *Dante* (1930; fig. 6)—will serve as “metapictures” that picture a new theory of Dante portraiture I am calling textual physiognomy.¹⁰

Phillips’s frontispiece stages the relationship between the factual Dante and his constructed image. The historical Dante is just a drab outline, but in his poetic works Dante—the artistic construct—becomes someone much more colorful, as if the historical Dante were the depleted copy of the portrait. Dante’s pose here also draws directly from a classical image of the poet by Luca Signorelli (1499–1502); thus, this metapicture is an image replicating an image drawn from another artistic construction. Dante’s history, image, and character have been constructed by art—both visual and literary. Dante himself, in his intensely autobiographical *La Vita Nuova* and *Divina Commedia*, left us a self-portrait in words, both of his pre- and post-exile selves.¹¹ Phillips’s frontispiece presents a textual and visual hall of mirrors, as Dante is continually replicated and shaped by his textual works and the visual works of artists. Phillips pictures this theory of Dante’s art/text relationship, reflecting on its own visual and textual reciprocity in a form of endless mirroring. Our own vision of Dante forms from our exposure to his great works and the visual art inspired by them. Thus, Dante may be our most important example of a life entirely shaped and continually livened by art.

Jean Cocteau, in another portrait of Dante, shows how the Dantean image is a symbiotic composition of image and text, where he is a conglomeration of scrolls and the repetition of his name. The linear, sketch-like quality of the print, along with the hollowed-out base, emphasize

Jr., *The Portraits of Dante Compared with the Measurements of His Skull and Reclassified* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1921).

⁸ Charles Eliot Norton, *On the Original Portraits of Dante* (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1865), 15.

⁹ Other studies of Dante portraiture include, in English, Richard Thayer Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante from Giotto to Raffael: A Critical Study, with a Concise Iconography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911); Jonathan Nelson, “Dante Portraits in Sixteenth Century Florence,” *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* 120, no. 6 (1992); Rachel Owen, “The Image of Dante, Poet and Pilgrim,” in *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); Norton, *On the Original Portraits of Dante*; Addison McLeod, “Portraits of Dante,” *Art Journal* 68 (1906); Walter Littlefield, “Dante Portraits: Pro and Con,” *The Critic* 42, no. 6 (1903); and Paget Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri: His Life and Works*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1910; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1971), 128–43. Citations refer to the Peter Smith edition. For studies in Italian, see G. L. Passerini, *Il Ritratto Di Dante* (Florence: Tipografia già S. Giuseppe, 1921); and Alvaro Spagnesi, “Per Il Ritratto Di Dante,” in *I Danti Riccardiani: parole e figure*, ed. Giovanna Lazzi and Giancarlo Savino (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 1996), 33–39, 69–75.

¹⁰ For metapictures, see W. J. T. Mitchell, “Metapictures,” chap. 2 in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35–82.

¹¹ For Dante’s anticipation of self-fashioning via authorship, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For Dante’s self-conscious “coining” of himself in his writing, see Susan Gaylard, *Hollow Men: Writing, Objects, and Public Image in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 5.

the constructed nature of Dante. This portrait renders Dante as the “imagetext” that he has always been, a fusing of text and image.¹² Discourse, in the form of Dante’s works, and figure, in the form of his portrait, meld together in a reciprocal relationship: works represent face and face represents works. The laurels of poetic achievement are the scrolls, and the name is branded, like a discourse tattoo, on the flesh. The sitter for Dante’s portraits is not Dante’s actual body but his textual *corpus*, an implicit fact that Cocteau’s portrait makes explicit.



Fig. 5. Tom Phillips, *Dante in His Study*, 1985. Frontispiece to *Dante’s Inferno* (Thames and Hudson, 1985). © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / DACS, London. Photo: *Dante’s Inferno* (Thames and Hudson, 1985).

¹² For imagetext, see Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 83, 89n, 98–99.

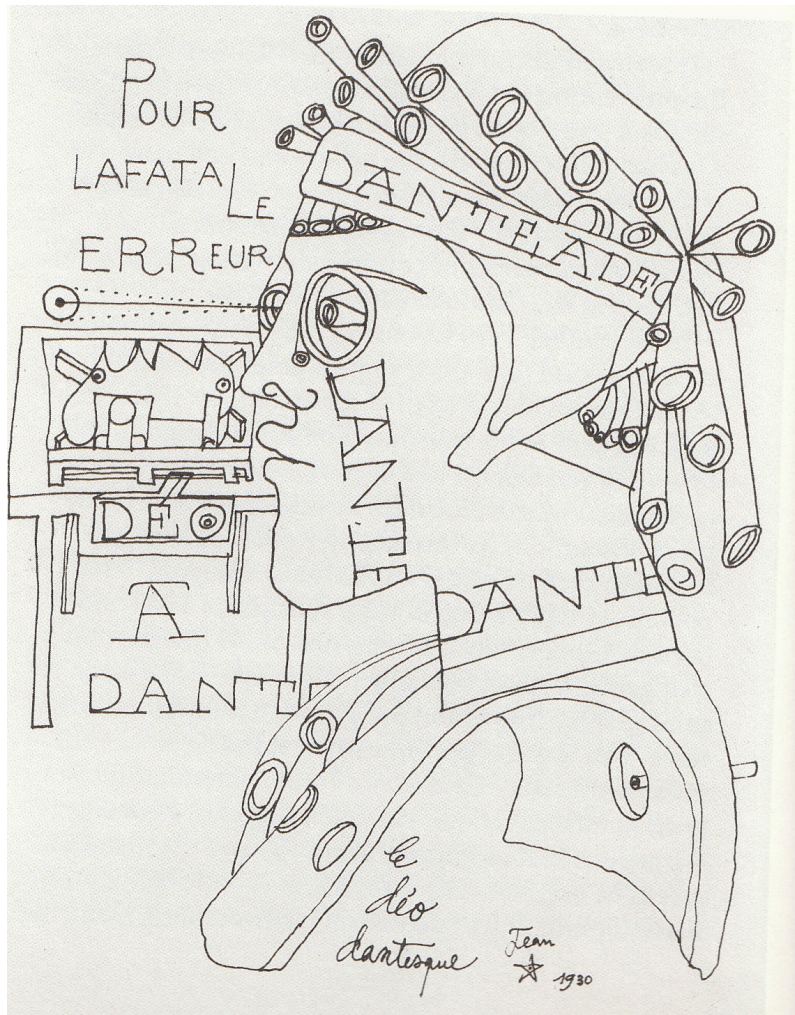


Fig. 6. Jean Cocteau, *Dante*, 1930. Pen and ink, 33.5 x 25.5 cm (13¼ x 10 in.). Private Collection. © 2016 ADAGP, Paris / Avec l'aimable autorisation de M. Pierre Bergé, président du Comité Jean Cocteau. Photo: *Jean Cocteau, poésie graphique* (Jacques Damase Galerie, 1973).

Phillips's and Cocteau's images picture a theory of Dantean portraiture that I call textual physiognomy. Just as physiognomy is the extrapolation of the inner moral and intellectual traits from the exterior features—a way to read the inner self from the outer contours of the visage—the portraits of Dante have become a way to read and interpret his works. His portraits originally drew from the aura emanating from his texts, but once established, the Face has become a perpetual “mind of the frontispiece” to his literary texts, serving as a visual decipherer of his works. Dante’s “hatchet profile” draws the gaze across from right to left, left to right, reinforced by the laurel leaves, which point and direct horizontally, and the aquiline nose and pointed chin. Reading this profile is almost like reading a line of text. It is also like viewing a lithic landscape, full of sharp edges and craggy features. It should be no surprise that such a face has helped to establish Dante’s bleak and dour *Inferno* as the most popular text, and that Dante’s entire oeuvre is typically interpreted as the product of a psyche ravaged by exile and by bitterness towards his enemies. That interpretation of Dante’s works has been predetermined by exposure to Dante’s

portraits. This essay will trace the history of Dante's textual physiognomy, from the formation of the hatchet profile to a significant revision of the "brows of dread renown" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, demonstrating the singular reciprocity of Dante's text, reputation, and his Face.

The Composition of Dante's Textual Physiognomy: Reading a Face

The development of this iconic Dante is an important, if mostly untold, chapter in portrait history. Dante's literary significance is often characterized as being a central figure in the transition from medieval to Renaissance literature. What has not been adequately detailed is how his image also occurs at a pivotal crossroads in portrait history, the moment where icon changes into art. According to Hans Belting, it is the portrait that is central to this shift, as "only the portrait, or image, has the presence necessary for veneration," and in this respect, it ranked higher than the narrative image.¹³ Dante is the one who embodies both the presence, the aura of a poet, yet also the likeness of an individual—as Gombrich said, he is the first figure after Christ who is immediately evocative.

The portraits of Dante are part of the trajectory of venerable portraiture, a history which demonstrates the inextricable iconographical connection of the poet and the saint. The poet-*vates* of the *Vergilius Romanus* formula was adopted by artists for the depiction of saints.¹⁴ Because the visual construction of the saint was buttressed by the verbal construction of the saint's lives, the portraits of saints were in many senses an embodiment of these narratives, a visual allegory of a textual self. The portraits were a "propagation of a person-ideal."¹⁵ Dante is only a generation removed from the visual and verbal constructions of St. Francis, and his own early biographies carry the some of the same hagiographic rhetorical gestures, such as in Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* (1357), where Dante's mother has an allegorical dream of delivering Dante beneath a laurel tree, where he subsequently becomes a shepherd of that tree and turns into a peacock.¹⁶

But it took a little longer for Dante's image to catch up with his texts. For almost the first one hundred years after Dante's death, his visual representations existed in the illuminated manuscripts of his texts. In them, he appeared as almost a nondescript character who often had to be identified by caption, far removed from the striking Raphaelesque poet (fig. 7).¹⁷ The resistance towards depicting an authentic likeness may be explained by the illuminator's desire to emphasize Dante's Everyman quality.¹⁸ But when Dante became more and more a literary and cultural force, "a specific portrait of Florence's great poet became necessary."¹⁹ The exact antecedent for Dante's traditional iconography is unknown, and it seems now it may have been an artistic construct, as the artists were still settling, from Domenico di Michelino to Raphael, on how best to translate Everyman into Poet. From the laurel leaf crown to the aquiline nose, both

¹³ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10.

¹⁴ Piper, *The Image of the Poet*, 6.

¹⁵ Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 13.

¹⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio and Leonardo Bruni Aretino, *The Earliest Lives of Dante*, trans. James Robinson Smith (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., Inc., 1963), 15.

¹⁷ For Dante in the illuminated manuscript tradition, see Peter H. Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles Singleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969). For an account of the transition from Dante in the illuminated manuscript tradition to the more recognizable physiognomy, see Owen, "The Image of Dante."

¹⁸ Owen, "Image of Dante," 87.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

accouterments and physical features seem deliberately chosen for maximum visual effect, ways to visually incarnate the aura of Dante's great work.



Fig. 7. Holkham Hall MS 514, *Canto 31 (Dante, Virgil, and the Giants)*, 3rd Quarter 14th Century. Library of the Earl of Leicester. Shelfmark: MS. Holkham Misc. 48, p. 48. © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Photo: Imaging Services, Bodleian Libraries.

And in his most important early portraits, such as Domenico di Michelino's (fig. 8), there are deliberate associations of Dante with the tradition of depicting the poet-vates and the writer-saint (like the Gospel writers) with the book. The di Michelino portrait functions almost like a saint's icon, projecting the presence of the poet. Painted on the 200th anniversary of Dante's birth, "the idea was to substitute an image for a real grave [...] the wall painting could serve as a kind of cenotaph, framed and positioned above a tomb in Florence's cathedral."²⁰ Di Michelino's image would prove more viable than an actual tomb. When a delegation of Florentines in 1515, backed by Pope Leo X, went to Ravenna to retrieve his bones for a monument to be created by Michelangelo, they opened the tomb only to find fragments of bone and withered laurel leaves. The delegation wrote to Leo X this explanation: "The much wished-for translation of Dante's remains did not take place [...] [We] found Dante neither in soul nor in body; and it is supposed that, as in his lifetime he journeyed in soul and in body through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, so

²⁰ Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 127.

in death he must have been received, body and soul, into one of those realms.”²¹ This quote again demonstrates how accounts of Dante take on hagiographical tones. The use of “translation” here is especially apt, because Dante has been translated into the visual image. In portraits like di Michelino’s, Dante “has been received” both “in soul and in body through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise.” As with the saints, Dante’s presence is forever corporealized in art.²²



Fig. 8. Domenico di Michelino, *Dante*, 1465. Tempera on panel. Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

As the emergent city-state of Florence rose, it looked for objects of veneration, and its writers became the Saints of Humanism. Dante had pride of place in such “collections of exemplary portraits,” such as Giovio’s portrait collection of great men and Andrea del Castagno’s *Uomini famosi*.²³ As Dante emerged from this important shift from patron saint to patron cultural hero, artists transferred the aura of the saint to Dante, who became a poet-prophet. As Alison Wright puts it, the early portrait united “remembrance of the lives and characters of

²¹ Corrado Ricci, *L’Ultimo rifugio di Dante Alighieri* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli Editore, 1891), 339. This translation given by Toynbee, *Dante Alighieri*, 113.

²² The “death mask” is another example of the attempt to corporealize the missing presence of Dante.

²³ For an account of the purpose of these “collections of exemplary portraits,” like Giovio’s see Joanna Woodall, introduction to *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), 2–3 and Shearer West, *Portraiture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 44–45; for Dante’s appearance in these collections, see Nelson, “Dante Portraits.”

the saints with that of the emergent cult of fame.”²⁴ Writers like Dante, now invested with the aura that was given to saints, radiated power in their niches, in their busts, in the way they hold court in a room. The very presence of a Dante portrait bestowed stature on the nobleman who owned it. Artists were able to use Dante’s image “to confer greater status upon Dante and to use him in order to promote Florentine cultural excellence.”²⁵ As a result, Dante representations appeared “more frequently in Florentine Renaissance portraits than any other cultural figure” and they “adorned a major guild hall, the town hall, and the cathedral.”²⁶ Via acts of cultural and artistic reciprocity, Dante’s image bestowed status on the owner, the place, the city, and, in turn, artists propagated Dante at an unprecedented rate.

This reciprocity also helped establish Dante’s physiognomy—such as the aquiline nose, which “signified magnanimity and conveyed a certain regal quality”²⁷—and the dominant mode of depicting him, the profile. An important development in Dante portraiture was the shift of emphasis from three-quarters view (di Michelino tradition) to the now more prevalent profile (Raphael tradition); the profile portrait for living authors in the 15th century, however, were all but abandoned as part of a movement toward individualism and naturalism.²⁸ The profile was associated with *virtù*, with heroic portraiture, reinforced by the ubiquitous use of the numismatic profile in ancient coinage (the “paradigm for the depiction of noble qualities”) and on the medallion portrait.²⁹ Dante’s profile became a deliberate visual anachronism drawing on these values, further distinguishing the Face and making it unique as portrait history diverged.

The profile represents the fusion of the heraldic face with the natural, the allegorical with the individual, and would become the predominant way of depicting Dante. As Meyer Schapiro writes, there is a contrasting symbolic message conveyed via the frontal and three-quarters view portrait versus the profile: he identifies the frontal/three-quarters view as the “first person” form and the profile as the “third person” form, which enables a stronger allegorical resonance.³⁰ With Dante, the profile helps accentuate his distance and superiority over the viewer, his aloofness and severity. Dante fused the concept of likeness, or realistic portrayal, with presence; or, to put it another way, Dante’s portraits brought together a recognizable individual with allegorical messages, a unique multivalent combination that can still be witnessed in portraits like Cocteau’s (fig. 3).

As Belting argues, this period in portrait history marked the “dissonance between the portrait and heraldry” which consisted of “two faces confronting one another: the natural face and the heraldic face.”³¹ The “image and sign” that they represented eventually fused into the naturalistic portraiture where the “face became the heraldic device of the Self.”³² For Dante,

²⁴ Alison Wright, “The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Portraiture,” in *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Ruben (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 88.

²⁵ Simon Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 14.

²⁶ Nelson, “Dante Portraits,” 59, 69.

²⁷ Maria H. Loh, *Still Lives: Death, Desire, and the Portrait of the Old Master* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 31.

²⁸ See Wright, “Memory of Faces,” 109. For an account of Renaissance heroic portraits, including the “leonine” profile, see Peter Meller, “Physiognomical Theory in Renaissance Heroic Portraits,” *International Congress of the History of Art 2* (1963).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁰ Meyer Schapiro, *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language* (New York: George Braziller, 1996), 73.

³¹ Belting, *Anthropology of Images*, 82.

³² *Ibid.*

there was no dissonance between portrait and heraldry—his natural face became the heraldic mark of his text. As more and more editions of Dante’s works were published, Dante’s portrait would appear as the frontispiece in full profile, which served in the same way an emblematic frontispiece would, as a gateway and interpreter of the text. See, for example, the portrait on the verso of the title page in a 1529 edition of the *Divina Commedia* with the celebrated Cristoforo Landino (1424–1498) commentary (fig. 9). The profile portrait serves as a visual counterweight to the text, and its left to right facing encourages the reader to read the face like a text. The eyes, thrusting chin and nose all point directly to the accompanying work. The portrait here is almost a pictorial commentary, a marginal exegesis. This textual physiognomy would not be as effective without the directional dynamic of the portrait profile.

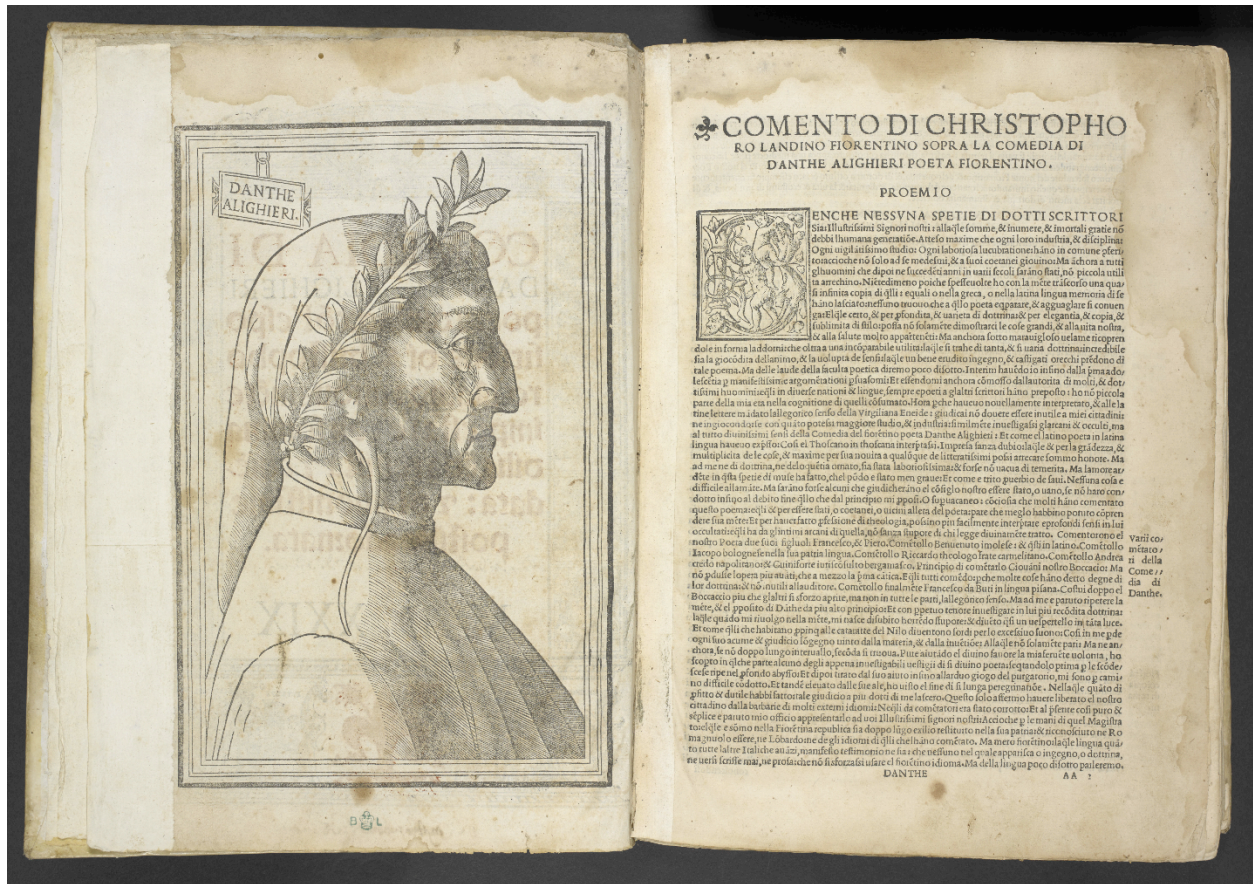


Fig. 9. *Commedia di Dante Alighieri Poeta Divino* (Venice, Jacob de Burgofraco, 1529). Shelfmark: General Reference Collection RB.23.c.5. © The British Library Board, RB.23.c.5, Portrait of Dante. Photo: British Library Imaging Services.

According to *Portraits: A History*, the profile could “depict characteristic features of the face—the forehead, chin, and nose, for example—easily and strikingly [...] The profile is also best suited to the primacy of *disegno*, the encircling line, a decisive development in art theory of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.”³³ It is no coincidence that the “hatchet” nature of Dante’s

³³ Andreas Beyer, *Portraits: A History*, trans. Steven Lindberg (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 65.

face, which cuts the canvas with its severe lines, depends on the forehead, chin, and nose for its sharpness. And it was a profile sharpened by artists, since the extant descriptions of Dante, in both Boccaccio's *Life of Dante* and in Dante's own description of himself in the *Purgatorio*, have Dante with a beard.³⁴ When emphasizing the forehead, chin, and nose, artists not only accentuated the visual acuity of Dante's face, but they also highlighted the "proportions of the classical face," which Rudolf Arnheim argues was a "subdivision into three equal parts, the forehead, the nose, and the mouth and the chin, associated with such mental functions as the imagination, the will power, and the activity drive."³⁵ All these aspects suited an interpretation of Dante as exalted writer of the *Inferno*, and it cleaved its way to a standard.

Through the work of artists, Dante became a paragon representative of Italy's poetic, linguistic, and cultural heritage to the rest of the world. Dante's aura spread across Europe and the Americas in the 19th century, and the Dante found in portraits, busts, statues, and illustrations was the one that Italy's artists had created, invested with the same aura and distinctive physiognomy. For instance, take Gustave Doré's *Dante* (1860), which came as a frontispiece for a majority of the *Divina Commedia* editions printed in England and the United States (fig. 10). Here is a grim, solitary figure, full of marmoreal stature and dignity, with the ravages of exile etched into his face—as poet and translator of Dante Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dubs him, "O poet saturnine!"³⁶ Transmuting Dante's image through Romanticism, however, has made him almost a caricature of bitterness and severity—the hatchet profile is now a battleaxe. Doré demonstrates how Dante's face became synonymous with the most gloomy portion of the *Divina Commedia*—the *Inferno*. All his *oeuvre* and cultural identity was read through this filter, an example of textual physiognomy at work. In Doré's image, the aquiline nose, usually pushing outward, plunges downward, pulling down the eyes with a visual gravity reinforced by the steep verticals of the frown and frown lines. Even the chin is cleaved by a sloping line, which leads the eye down through the split collar and then to the lapel, which forms an arrow pointing downwards. Much of the visual energy in the picture moves down, echoing the downward trajectory of the *Inferno*, except for the laurel leaves that thrust out like darting spears in the same direction of his piercing gaze. The ubiquity of Doré's Dante cannot be overstated: his illustrations have appeared in almost 200 editions of Dante's poems, and his "rendering of the poet's text still accompanies, or even determines, our vision of the *Commedia*."³⁷

England in the 19th century would prove a particularly fertile ground for Doré's editions, because by 1861 it had embraced Dante, and his image, as no other Continental author before. The transferal of Dante's aura to England can be seen in politics, such as the way he was appropriated by Victorian titans such as Prime Minister William Gladstone,³⁸ and also in literature, such as Blake and the Romantics.³⁹ Perhaps one of the most fervid embracers of

³⁴ Littlefield, "Dante Portraits: Pro and Con," 530.

³⁵ Rudolf Arnheim, "The Face and the Mind Behind It," in *The Split and the Structure: Twenty-Eight Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 141.

³⁶ Longfellow, "Divina Commedia III," in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 2 (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), line 2.

³⁷ Aida Audeh, "Gustave Doré's Illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Innovation, Influence, and Reception," *Studies in Medievalism* 18 (2009): 125.

³⁸ See Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Dante: Victorian Statesman, Medieval Poet* (Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2006).

³⁹ For Dante's reception in literature, art, and culture in England, see Nick Havely, *Dante's British Public: Readers & Texts, from the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Steve Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry: Shelley to Eliot* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Paget Tonybee,

Dante's image and aura was Thomas Carlyle, in his description of Dante in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*.⁴⁰ For Carlyle, and for the 19th century, Dante represented a hero poet, and for Carlyle, as for the 19th century, this idea comes as much from art as from anywhere else. Carlyle begins his outline of Dante's character, not from historical documents, but from Stefano Tofanelli's portrait of Dante over four hundred years after the poet's death that was a popular frontispiece to English editions of the *Divina Commedia* (fig. 11).⁴¹ Carlyle understood the power of portraits for instruction, as he was one of the founding figures for the National Portrait Gallery, essentially a nation-state version of Giovo's portrait collection of cultural heroes. The ecstatic ekphrasis below shows just how affecting Dante's portraits could be, and how they influenced interpretation of his works:

[L]ooking on it, you cannot help inclining to think genuine, whoever did it. To me it is a most touching face; perhaps of all faces that I know, the most so [...] I think it is the mournfulest face that ever was painted from reality; an altogether tragic, heart-affecting face. There is in it, as foundation of it, the softness, tenderness, gentle affection as of a child; but all this is as if congealed into sharp contradiction, into abnegation, isolation, proud hopeless pain [...] the lip is curled in a kind of godlike disdain of the thing that is eating-out his heart [...] The face of one wholly in protest, and life-long unsundering battle, against the world. Affection all converted into indignation: An implacable indignation; slow, equable, silent, like that of a god!⁴²

Though not a strict profile portrait, the engraving and Carlyle's description of it are almost a caricature of the severe qualities of Dante's image. In the engraving, the visual gravity of the sloping shoulders, the v-neck with a line cleaving down the vest, and the exaggeratingly pendent nose again serve as a form of textual physiognomy, echoing the experience of the *Inferno*. As this was the most popular frontispiece engraving for English editions in Carlyle's time, it prepared the reader for the text to come and served as a commentary on the poem's character. And Carlyle reads it as "sharp contradiction, into abnegation, isolation, proud hopeless pain." This pejorative cascade moves from a trio of polysyllabic "-ion" nouns to two alliterative monosyllables—"proud" and "pain" bridged by the consonant "p" in "hopeless." It is the verbal equivalent of the engraving's severe visual cues, where Dante's face is something to be revered

Britain's Tribute to Dante in Literature and Art: A Chronological Record of 540 Years (c. 1380–1920) (London: Oxford University Press, 1921); id., *Dante in English Literature: From Chaucer to Cary, c. 1380–1844*, 2 vols. (London: Methuen and Co., 1909); id., "Dante in English Art: A Chronological Record of Representations by English Artists," *Annual Report of the Dante Society* 38 (1919); Michael Caesar, ed., *Dante: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 1989); David Bindman, Stephen Hebron, and Michael O'Neill, eds. *Dante Rediscovered: From Blake to Rodin* (Grasmere, UK: The Wordsworth Trust, 2007); Werner P. Friederich, *Dante's Fame Abroad, 1350–1850* (New York: Garrett Litho Co., 1950); David Wallace, "Dante in England," in *Dante for the New Millennium*, ed. Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2003); Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); and C. P. Brand, "Dante and the English Poets," in *The Mind of Dante*, ed. Uberto Limentani (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

⁴⁰ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Carl Niemeyer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).

⁴¹ The source of Carlyle's outburst was "presumably an engraving made not later than 1795 by Raffael Morghen from a painting or drawing prepared for him by Stefano Tofanelli" (Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 183).

⁴² Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 86.

and feared, almost pitied. This was the prevalent Dantean image the 19th century knew, believed in, and to some extent, worshiped, as Carlyle writes, “like that of a god”: a vengeful poet-god of the *Inferno*.

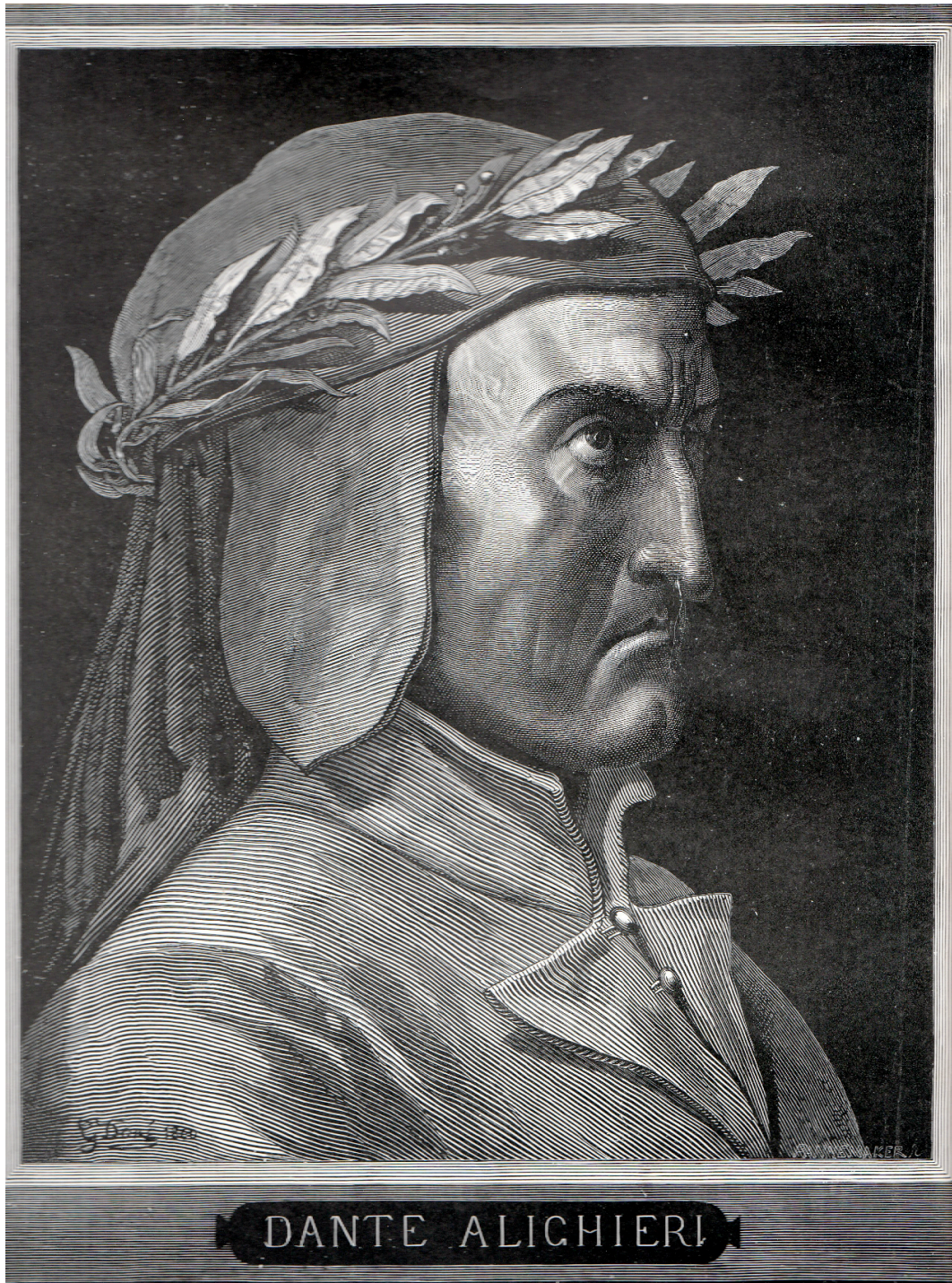


Fig. 10. Gustave Doré, *Dante*, 1865. Woodblock engraving. Photo: *The Vision of Hell by Dante Alighieri* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, 1865).



Fig. 11. Stefano Tofanelli (artist), Raphael Morghen (engraver), *Dante Alighieri*, 18th–19th century. Engraving on paper. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of the Heirs of Mrs. Mary Hemenway, M970. © President and Fellows of Harvard College. Photo: Imaging Department.

Revising Textual Physiognomy: Rossetti’s New Life Dante

An artist working in this tradition of Dantean portraiture has an exacting “patron” to contend with—this ossified tradition of depicting Dante, which in turn has shaped how Western civilization has received and interpreted his works. As Tom Phillips explains his process working on *Dante in His Study* (fig. 5), “Dante’s physiognomy is based on the traditional received image of a hatchet-faced ascetic that comes down to us, largely by a kind of visual word of mouth, via the probably spurious death-mask in Florence, the Torrigiano bust in Naples and the paintings of

Raphael and Botticelli.”⁴³ The “death mask” in Florence is a perfect example of the closed loop of artistic representation of Dante. It surfaced in the 19th century and received a frenzied welcome, reproduced as busts and in frontispieces to editions. While it was almost certainly based off of a Dante portrait itself, it was used to validate the veracity of established Dante portraits. At its height, it was almost a saint’s relic, the closest one could get to the physical presence of Dante, but it was generated from art, and in turn solidified the stature of other Dantean art. Art begets art.⁴⁴

Any artist who wrestles with or breaks with this portrait tradition, “this visual word of mouth,” which has essentially become an edict, deserves special notice. The second half of this study considers the most important break with Dante’s portrait tradition in history by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, demonstrating the power of artists to reshape textual physiognomy. While Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s works on Dante have been extensively treated, they have most often taken on the traditional perspective of how Dante has influenced Rossetti. No study has adequately placed Rossetti’s images of Dante into the tradition of Dantean portraiture, to show how he dramatically revises the way we see and read Dante, presenting the 19th century with an alternative to the Dante of the *Divine Comedy*, the Dante in exile, the apotheosized poet hero of the ages, softening that hatchet profile and ultimately undermining the authority of those “brows of dread renown.”⁴⁵ The metapictorial self-awareness of an artist like Tom Phillips would not have been possible without Rossetti’s introduction of visual cognitive dissonance regarding the “real” pictorial Dante. *Vita Nuova Incipit*, “the new life begins,” is how Dante’s first major work in 1295 began. And it is through Rossetti that Dante received his new visual life.

It was inevitable that Rossetti would have some interest in Dante, as his father, Gabriele Rossetti, an expatriate from Italy, was an influential, if a tad eccentric, commentator on Dante. According to Rossetti, “the first associations I have [with Dante] are connected with my father’s devoted studies [...] Thus, in those early days, all around me partook of the influence of the great Florentine.”⁴⁶ In addition to his direct influence, Rossetti’s father maintained contacts with Dantisti all over Europe, and his relationship with the painter Seymour Kirkup (1788–1880) would prove to have major impact on Rossetti’s work. Kirkup was an instrumental figure in the “rediscovery” of an alleged portrait of Dante by Giotto in the Bargello of Florence in 1840.⁴⁷ The portrait’s authenticity has been called into question in the 20th century, but at the time, this would have been an electrifying discovery—here was a portrait by a contemporary of Dante’s,

⁴³ Tom Phillips, *Dante’s Inferno* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 284.

⁴⁴ For the death mask, its significance, and its certain status as a false relic, see Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 36–56.

⁴⁵ For studies of Dante and Rossetti, see H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Art and Life* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1899), 32–51; Joan Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 127–40; John Woodhouse, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Translation and Illustration of the *Vita nuova*,” in *Britain and Italy from Romanticism to Modernism: A Festschrift for Peter Brand*, ed. Martin McLaughlin (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 67–86; Nicolette Gray, *Rossetti, Dante, and Ourselves* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947); Giuliana Pieri, “Dante and the Pre-Raphaelites: British and Italian Responses,” in *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. Antonella Braidà and Luisa Cale (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007); John Woodhouse, “Dante and the Rossetti Family,” in *Italy’s Three Crowns: Reading Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio*, ed. Zygmunt G. Baranski and Martin McLaughlin (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2007); and Martin McLaughlin, “The Pre-Raphaelites and Italian Literature,” in *The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy*, ed. Colin Harrison and Christopher Newall (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2010).

⁴⁶ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 240. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Rossetti’s poems and prose are from this edition.

⁴⁷ For an account of the discovery, see Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 73–103. For a discussion of its authenticity, see Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, and Gombrich, “Giotto’s Portrait of Dante?”

and a painter the stature of Giotto, no less. Even more important, the fresco preserves the only visual evidence of a pre-exile Dante, and, as Kirkup's watercolor sketches show (fig. 12), a dramatically different physiognomy, especially compared to Carlyle's ekphrasis or Doré's illustration. Gone are the deep lines of hardship, the frown, the "brows of dread renown." Where there was hardness and angular severity, there is now soft lips and rounded nose and chin. Where there was visual movement down, there is now movement upward, from the diagonal band on the cap to the flower he is holding. Where there were dark tones of despair, there are now soothing shades of white, red, and green, the colors of hope and love.



Fig. 12. Seymour Kirkup, *Dante*, from *Giotto's Fresco in the Bargello*, 1859. Chromolithograph facsimile published by Arundel Society, 53.4 x 33.7 cm (21 x 13 ¼ in.). London, British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Photo: British Library Imaging Services.

Kirkup sent one of his watercolors to the Rossetti household in 1841, and that painting, according to Rossetti's brother "probably helped as much as anything that had occurred before that time (1841) to put Dante Gabriel Rossetti *en rapport* with Dante."⁴⁸ Rossetti kept the copy that Kirkup sent to the family until his death.⁴⁹ The portrait may contrast sharply with the

⁴⁸ Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 236.

⁴⁹ Virginia Surtees, *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882): A Catalogue Raisonné* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971), 1:19.

established Dantean image, but its power on Rossetti, essentially launching his career of transmuting Dante's image, demonstrates the kind of cultural force the Face had and still has. Unfortunately, it is not known if Kirkup's sketch was completely accurate or a creative interpretation of what he saw, since the restoration of the Bargello fresco by Antonio Marini hardened the softness seen in Kirkup's watercolor sketches (fig. 13). If Kirkup's sketches were accurate of the original state before the restoration, then it was almost as if Marini's hand was guided by the inherited template of Dantean portraiture up to that point, "the visual word of mouth," which insisted on severity. Marini treated the face as a palimpsest, over which would be inscribed the dominant narrative of Dante. But that short glimpse of another Dante was enough to potentially change the way Dante was seen forever, thanks to Rossetti.



Fig. 13. Giotto (?), *Dante Alighieri*, c.1337. Fresco. Florence, Bargello Museum.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

To Rossetti, there were two Dantes, one represented by Giotto's portrait, which should be associated with *The New Life*, and the other by the "the posthumous mask,"⁵⁰ which portrayed, in Rossetti's words "a face dead in exile after the death of hope" which should "front the first page of the Sacred Poem,"⁵¹ *The Divine Comedy*. This dichotomy would be a lifelong obsession for

⁵⁰ The Torrigiani "Death Mask." Gabriele Rossetti had a copy sent to him, which Rossetti would have seen.

⁵¹ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Early Italian Poets*, ed. Sally Purcell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 149.

Rossetti. In c.1867, when Henry Treffry Dunn (1839–1899) was attempting to gain favor with Rossetti, he was given a commission “to make facsimile copies of two heads of Dante that were in his [Charles Augustus Howell’s] study, but the owner of which was Rossetti.”⁵² One of the heads was the Giotto portrait as transcribed by Kirkup, while the other was an “Italian oil,”⁵³ or of the more “hatchet-faced” variety. These two Dantes so dominated Rossetti’s visual imagination that they were a test for aspiring painters, and an understanding of their contradistinction was a gateway to his home and patronage.

And for Rossetti, it was more than just setting them up for contrast—one had to make a choice. The portrait and artistic tradition up to Rossetti had chosen the post-exile Dante, the *Divina Commedia* Dante. In contrast, only a few of Rossetti’s paintings and poems dealt with that Dante. Rossetti only chose one subject from the *Inferno*, which was the most popular canticle to illustrate for other artists. An overwhelming number of Rossetti’s artistic depictions of Dante instead presented a pre-exile, youthful, *New Life* Dante, a Dante in love, not in bitter exile. Rossetti’s translation of the *Vita Nuova* was only the third in English, and, even more important, he was the first fine artist to depict scenes from *The New Life* in original artwork.⁵⁴

By showing scenes from *The New Life* accompanied with his own translation of the poem, Rossetti asserted the poem and the pre-exile poet as an important alternative to the established Dante. In the 1874 preface to *Dante and His Circle*, Rossetti defends his choice to translate the title *Vita Nuova* as *The New Life*, because prior editors had chosen “to explain the title as meaning *Early Life*.”⁵⁵ *The New Life* is the more “mystical interpretation” for Rossetti, and he could be responding to the way that the translation of *Vita Nuova* as *Early Life* predisposed critics to see that work as a product of the youthful Dante, while *The Divine Comedy* was the product of a more mature Dante who in some senses revised, and in other cases rejected, the work of his juvenilia. For Rossetti, to call the work *The New Life*, in contrast, presents a perennial attitude, not to be superseded by age.

Another defense of *The New Life* is in his sonnet “On the ‘Vita Nuova’ of Dante,” where Rossetti writes about how *The New Life* essentially freed him from the *Divine Comedy*. He was “long bound within the threefold charm” of the *Divine Comedy*, and then he discovers:

the book [within which] I found pourtrayed
Newborn that Paradisial Love of his,
And simple like a child
[...]
To such a child as this,
Christ, charging well his chosen ones, forbade
Offence: ‘for lo! Of such my kingdom is.’⁵⁶

⁵² Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle (Cheyne Walk Life)*, ed. Gale Pedrick (London: Elkin Mathews, 1904), 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁴ Based on my reading from Toynbee, “Dante in English Art.” For a comprehensive list of Rossetti’s paintings and drawings of Dante, see Surtees, *Paintings and Drawings*; Paget Toynbee, “Chronological List, with Notes, of Paintings and Drawings from Dante by Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” in *Scritti varii di erudizione e di critica in onore di Rodolfo Renier (con xx tavole fuori testo)* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1912). Toynbee lists 96 Dante-inspired works on his list, but Surtees is most reliable.

⁵⁵ Rossetti, *The Early Italian Poets*, 125.

⁵⁶ *Collected Poetry and Prose*, lines 5, 9–14.

His discovery of *The New Life* is at the 9th line of the sonnet, the point of the *volta*, or rhetorical turn, a structural placement which sets up a similar internal dialectic as one would find in a Shakespearean sonnet, where the problem is described in the first octave—in this case his “bondage” to *The Divine Comedy*—while its solution—his freedom through *The New Life*—is given in the final sextet.

And he meets head on the typical interpretation of *The New Life* being mere Dantean juvenilia, by invoking Matthew 19:14 and Jesus’s exaltation of the child and scolding of his Disciples to be more like children. In Rossetti’s poems and paintings, the pre-exile, *New Life* Dante becomes almost a commentary on the post-exile *Divine Comedy* Dante, where the *New Life* is a pre-lapsarian alternative. Even when he does treat a subject from the *Divine Comedy* in art, they gravitate toward the “various ‘belle donne’, which connect most obviously with the subject-matter of Dante’s early poetry.”⁵⁷ The one poem of Rossetti’s that deals with the post-exile Dante, “Dante in Verona,” portrays a Dante whose mind is still in the pre-exile past, who yearns for a place “where now thy body may not be / But where in thought thou still remain’st,”⁵⁸ i.e., with Beatrice in *The New Life* Florence. Rossetti even invents a scene in the poem where Dante recites his *La Vita Nuova* to a requesting lady. Originally, Rossetti intended “Dante in Verona” to preface *The New Life*, which would have been inverted chronologically, but in just the right place for Rossetti’s rhetoric. *The New Life* takes primacy; all roads—even those in the post-exile period—lead back to that pre-exile Dante.

This new Dante is a considerably different presence than the one the tradition dictated. Far from “the poet saturnine,” Rossetti’s Dante is more human, less full of disdain, and more historically bound. In *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice: Dante Drawing the Angel* (fig. 14), Dante’s face is unmarked by the ravages of exile. One of the most important features is the historicity of the scene. We are in a home that Rossetti has reproduced with painstaking detail. Outside of the window are the Arno and medieval Florence. Armed with a copy of Bonnard’s *Costumes*, Rossetti garbs the characters in period dress. As A. I. Grieve writes, “Rossetti has [...] taken pains to make the figure of Dante and his surroundings as immediate as possible by the telling use of historic detail.”⁵⁹ In pen and ink versions of this same scene, Rossetti would even date the moment exactly: Florence, 9th June, 1291. This historicizing is in stark contrast to Renaissance painters like Raphael and Vasari who present Dante in achronic, timeless tableaux that reinforce Dante as an allegorical icon. Rossetti’s Dante, on the other hand, is very human, an impression buttressed by Rossetti’s refusal in this case to portray Dante in an artificial and classical profile, in fact turning the head as far as one can away from the traditional left to right profile. Although Rossetti was not always able to escape the gravity of the profile for Dante (some visual traditions are too hard to break), it is interesting, in these early portrayals, that he would attempt to reject it. Because the profile portrait focuses so much on the face, the subject’s “physicality was significantly reduced, even dematerialized.”⁶⁰ Rossetti basically “rematerializes” Dante, so that he exists in the historical moment, instead of the apotheosized ages, and he turns his face in to the world of the painting, instead of looking off into eternity. Rossetti often used male models, in this case his brother William Michael Rossetti,⁶¹ for his

⁵⁷ Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry*, 112.

⁵⁸ *Collected Poetry and Prose*, lines 196–97.

⁵⁹ A.I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Pre-Raphaelite Period, 1848–1850* (Hingham, Norfolk: Real World Publications, 1973), 14.

⁶⁰ Beyer, *Portraits: A History*, 65.

⁶¹ Surtees, *Paintings and Drawings*, 1:22.

Dante portraits, which contributed to the grounding of the Face in reality, rather than symbolic abstraction.



Fig 14. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The First Anniversary of the Death of Beatrice (Dante Drawing the Angel)*, 1853. Watercolor, 41.9 x 70 cm (16 ½ x 24 in.). Oxford, Ashmolean Museum. Photo: WikiArt.

Another interesting example of Rossetti’s “rematerializing” is his almost contemporaneous *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* (fig. 15), which depicts the actual moment of creation for the Bargello Giotto Dante mentioned above (fig. 13), the visual *raison d’être* of Rossetti’s revision of Dantean portraiture. As with *The First Anniversary*, Dante’s face pivots away from the profile and into the lived space of the painting; however, in this case, Dante’s face pulls away from his own profile rendered by Giotto. Rossetti “rematerializes” Dante by rendering his full body, while the Giotto rendering is merely a profile bust, more in line with Dante’s portraiture orthodoxy. The distance between the two Dantes is further emphasized by the tonal contrast between the portrait Dante and the “real” Dante sitting for that portrait. This contrast inverts the relationship between real Dante and art Dante that Phillips presented in his frontispiece (fig. 5): in Phillips, the portrait is more vivid, while here, in Rossetti, the portrait is a faded replica. And yet, as with Phillips, both “historical” Dantes are drawn from the art model, and they are ultimately artistic constructs themselves (Phillips’s Dante modelled on Signorelli, Rossetti’s Dante on Giotto). But Rossetti has “corrected” Giotto by introducing the real object of Dante’s gaze—Beatrice walking in a procession. Rossetti’s Giotto, a dutiful follower of the “visual word

of mouth” on Dante portraiture, has turned Dante’s diagonal gaze into a horizontal profile one.



Fig. 15. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, 1852. Watercolor, and pencil, 36.8 x 47 cm (14 ½ x 18 ½ in.). Private Collection. Photo: WikiArt

Both paintings portray Dante with human companions, a situation rarely depicted by previous artists. In *First Anniversary*, Rossetti portrays Dante’s humanness by showing Dante’s moment of weakness in front of his companions, very different than the solitary Dante. In earlier pen and ink versions of this scene, Dante is standing,⁶² so Rossetti made the decision to emphasize this weaker kneeling Dante in the most finalized realization. While still the focus of the painting by the implied lines caused by the gaze of the three companions and the outstretched arm, the eye moves downward as it goes left to right towards Dante. The individuals are also connected by interlocking arms, bringing Dante into the circle of mankind. This is not the solitary sentinel viewers were so accustomed to seeing.

Far from an isolated icon, in *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation* (fig. 16), Dante relies on a companion to support him as he stares transfixed at

⁶² Ibid., 1:12.

Beatrice. As in *Dante Drawing an Angel*, Rossetti draws the eye downward from left to right to reach Dante. In this painting, Dante is not even the subject. The gaze of both Dante and his companion are on Beatrice. The snakelike line of figures moving from left to right, and the doubled male gaze moving from right to left, meet in the center, emphasizing the open space between Beatrice and Dante. The real subject is the gaze traversing that space, not Dante. The one figure crossing the space is a child holding out a flower, which invokes Rossetti's description of Dante's love for Beatrice, immortalized in *The New Life*, as akin to being a child. Dante's right hand is almost contorted and useless, as he is powerless before Beatrice.

As with *Dante Drawing an Angel*, Rossetti immerses Dante in a historical moment and with fellow human beings. Beatrice and Dante's connection through his gaze is even echoed by the man and the female wine harvester on the left, so that Rossetti makes Dante's love for Beatrice visually equivalent with the commoners. His companions are no longer just his book and his work, as depicted in the poet-vates Dante images. Rossetti appears to be combining two moments that appear separately in *The New Life* for maximum visual effect but less textual fidelity—the denial of her salutation and a marriage feast.⁶³ There is no mention of the procession of ladies or the child in the original text. Rossetti turns the Dantean portrait tradition, with all its prior aura of poet hero, into a genre painting.

In striking contrast, consider Lord Frederic Leighton's *Dante in Exile* (fig. 17), which shows an attempt to reconcile Rossetti's approach to historicizing Dante while also adhering to Dante's traditional look. Although Dante stands amidst a throng of people, he stands alone, more like a sentinel posing for later statues. His marmoreal and rigidly vertical pose contrasts starkly—almost comically—with the tumult around him, particularly the fleshy posterior of the courtier. As in *Beatrice Meeting Dante*, there is a child, but instead of a connection between the child and Dante there is a gulf, both in size and in color, the child's lambent white against Dante's funereal black. While the other figures gesture and touch each other, Dante compresses himself with folded arms. He doesn't seem part of the world of the painting and just stares straight towards the viewer, as the viewer may pay him the respect he commands with his gaze. In a painting that attempts to historicize Dante, he stands as eternal and ahistorical as Magritte's Dante on a pillar. The characters in the scene observe him as if they were contemplating a statue, something decidedly other. The fleshy human crowd is transient, but the eternal Dante remains. The enormous size of the painting (60 x 100 in.) attempts to give the scene an epic power that Rossetti is deliberately avoiding in *The First Anniversary*, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, and *Beatrice Meeting Dante*.

Rossetti ceaselessly worked over his own revisionist image of Dante. Take *The Dream of Dante*, one painted in 1856, the other, the largest work Rossetti ever painted, in 1871 (figs. 18 and 19). On first glance, they look almost the same, but there are dramatic differences in the faces of Dante. The 1856 Dante is much like Rossetti's earlier portraits—the rounded, smooth countenance influenced by Giotto's Dante. This later Dante is much closer to a realistic face. While he had used male models before with Dante's face, this time he gives the face wholly over to the model. In his later portraits, Rossetti presents a Dante his audience had never seen before.

⁶³ Rossetti, *The New Life*, in *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 256 and 261.



Fig. 16. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Beatrice Meeting Dante at a Marriage Feast, Denies Him Her Salutation*, 1855. Watercolor, 32 x 42 cm (13 ½ x 16 ½ in.). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Photo: WikiArt.



Fig. 17. Lord Federic Leighton, *Dante in Exile*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 254 cm (60 x 100 in.). Private Collection. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

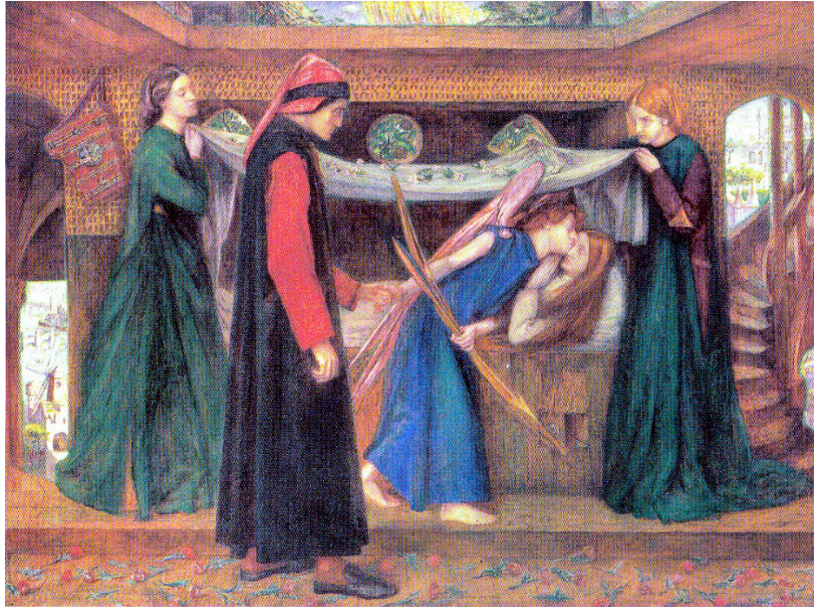


Fig. 18. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, 1856. Watercolor, 47 x 65.4 cm (18 ½ x 25 ¾ in.). London, Tate Gallery. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

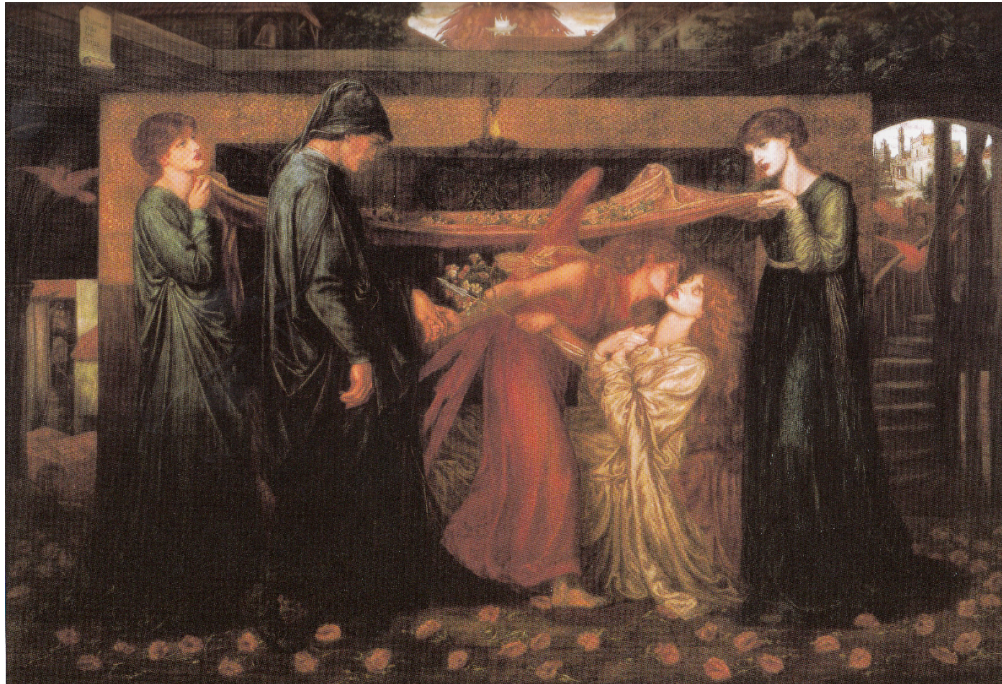


Fig. 19. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice*, 1871. Oil on canvas, 210.8 x 320 cm (83 x 125 in.). Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

He does so once again in the *Boat of Love*, which he was working on just before he died (fig. 20). This painting is based off of one of Dante's early lyric poems, where Dante imagines a pleasant boat voyage taken by Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni.⁶⁴ This scene of embarking on the boat is not described by the poem, but again it gives Rossetti an opportunity to decorate the scene with observers, and to create another serpentine human connection through interlocking hands. There is no basis in the source poem for Rossetti to bring Dante into this human connection, which other artists, like Leighton, deliberately avoided.

And most dramatic is that the face of Dante is barely emphasized. He is turning *away* from the profile and the three-quarters and into the picture frame, looking towards Beatrice. His face and dark hair are again a stark departure from both the Giotto Dante and the traditional Dante iconography. No other visual artist in the Dante tradition has diverged so far from the hatchet-profile. Rossetti should be seen as a kind of Dante iconoclast, gradually wresting Dante away from the "visual word of mouth" until he becomes someone of Rossetti's own creation.



Fig. 20. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Boat of Love*, 1881. Unfinished oil on canvas, 124.7 x 94 cm (49 x 37 in.). Birmingham, Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery. Photo: WikiArt.

⁶⁴ Rossetti, "Sonnet (to Guido Cavalcanti). He Imagines a Pleasant Voyage for Guido, Lapo Gianni, and Himself, with Their Three Ladies," in *The Early Italian Poets*, ed. Sally Purcell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 228.

Conclusion: “The Body within Which I Cast a Shadow”

Rossetti’s *New Life* Dante would linger in the imaginations and art of subsequent artists and writers, creating a secondary current that never replaces, but compliments—even disrupts—the one that focuses on the saturnine poet and *The Divine Comedy*. As Richard Holbrook writes, “Most of [Rossetti’s works] have had a wide vogue, especially in the English-speaking world, and have been reproduced in hundreds of forms.”⁶⁵ Also, responding to Rossetti’s initiative, other artists began to try their own hand at reappraising Dante. In these representative paintings by Henry Holiday (1839–1927) and Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927), the human Dante interacting with the crowd, the historicity, and “rematerializing,” are all due to Rossetti’s influence (figs. 21 and 22). Of particular interest is the Stillman piece, because she has taken the Rossettian Dante and moved him into a post-exile period, a barrier that Rossetti had not even crossed in his art. Compare Stillman’s Dante with Leighton’s (fig. 17)—both are supposed to take place at the same time in Dante’s life, although the Dantes could not be more different. Stillman’s Dante, like Rossetti’s, is connected physically in the world, through his arm being held by his companion (in Holiday, Dante touches the parapet), and he is encircled by other women. Stillman’s Dante engages where Leighton’s withdraws, softens where Leighton’s hardens. This vision of a post-exile Dante who yet remains akin to the pre-exile one would not have been possible without Stillman building from Rossetti’s new iconography. Taking her cues from Rossetti, this Dante retains *The New Life* rather than overthrowing an *Early Life*. In fact, the moment depicted in this painting is Dante reciting *Vita Nuova*, the scene invented by Rossetti in his poem “Dante at Verona,” after which the painting was named.⁶⁶



Fig. 21. Henry Holiday, *Dante and Beatrice*, 1883. Oil on Canvas, 142.2 x 203.2 cm (56 x 80 in.). Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

⁶⁵ Holbrook, *Portraits of Dante*, 237–38.

⁶⁶ Margaretta S. Frederick and Jan Marsh, *Poetry in Beauty: The Pre-Raphaelite Art of Marie Spartali Stillman* (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2015), 102.



Fig. 22. Marie Spartali Stillman, *Dante at Verona*, 1888. Gouache and watercolor on paper, 49 x 73 cm (19 1/3 x 28 3/4 in.). Private Collection. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Rossetti has influenced not only subsequent Dante art but also Dante criticism. Because of Rossetti's work, *The New Life* gained a critical Renaissance in England and America, and Rossetti was responsible for a virtual "cult of Beatrice." T.S. Eliot, one of the greatest American Dante scholars of the first half of the 20th century, wrote that Rossetti's work, "first by my rapture and next by my revolt, held up my appreciation of Beatrice by many years."⁶⁷ W. B. Yeats, whose writing was also heavily influenced by Dante, wrote, "I am no Dante scholar, and I but read him in Shadwell or in Dante Rossetti, but I am always persuaded that he celebrated the most pure lady poet ever sung."⁶⁸ Because Rossetti revised the textual physiognomy of Dante, critics and visual artists read and see Rossetti's Dante.

Thanks to Rossetti, there will always be two Dantes: the Raphaelesque heroic poet of self-abnegation from the *Divine Comedy* and Rossetti's Giottoesque alternative from the *New Life*. The resulting visual cognitive dissonance between the two Dante types has resulted in the destabilizing of the "poet saturnine" Dante image, enabling the deconstruction of its power. Poets like Yeats and Cummings, clearly operating under the Rossetti *New Life* Dante, view the traditional Dante as an "image" or a "stern mask" that Dante "fashioned from his opposite" and

⁶⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1932), 223.

⁶⁸ Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, 26.

under which “trembles the tremendous soul.”⁶⁹

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate the dichotomy is through the frontispiece to *A Shadow of Dante*, written by Rossetti’s sister, M. F. Rossetti (fig. 23). As M.F. Rossetti writes: “The Vita Nuova, the work as well as the record of early life, has the soft delicacy of Dante’s youthful face portrayed by Giotto; but the Divina Commedia, whether professedly narrating the past or the future, is throughout impressed with the deeper, sterner, sadder lines to be traced in his solemn death-mask.”⁷⁰



Fig. 23: H. T. Dunn (artist), J. Cooper (engraver), *Dante’s Portrait by Giotto, and His Death-Mask*, 1871. Frontispiece to M. F. Rossetti, *A Shadow of Dante* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1900).

⁶⁹ For “image [...] fashioned from his opposite,” see Yeats, “Ego Dominus Tuus,” lines 28–29; for “mask [...] trembles the tremendous soul,” see Cummings, “Great Dante stands in Florence,” lines 11, 14.

⁷⁰ M. F. Rossetti, *A Shadow of Dante* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1900), 21–22.

M. F. Rossetti's prose clearly demonstrates textual physiognomy at work, where the way one reads a text is the same as one reads a face: the *New Life* has "the soft delicacy of Dante's youthful face," while the *Divine Comedy* "is impressed with the deeper sterner, sadder lines to be traced in his solemn death-mask." Because of Rossetti, these two Dantes will forever be set in opposition: one to be read in light of the other. Rossetti's legacy, however, is not only to set them in contention but also to destabilize the established Dante. In the frontispiece, the Giotto Dante is given visual primacy, fully revealed, as the more traditional Dante is partially concealed behind, and then behind that is the shadow. The images of Dante become more and more insubstantial, overlaid, almost like a visual palimpsest, by the Giotto. In Antonio Marini's restoration-revision of Giotto's Bargello Dante (fig. 13), he carves Giotto's softer features into a more lithic face that matches his inherited saturnine Dante template; the frontispiece, however, by positioning the Giotto Dante on the right, gives the sense of an excavation-rescue of the *New Life* Dante from the Raphaelesque *Divine Comedy* Dante. And because of Rossetti, one can now be seen as the "mask," the "shadow," while the other is the true Dante, the *vita nuova* Dante, the Rossetti Dante. Tellingly, it is Rossetti who designed the frontispiece.⁷¹

The epigraph on the frontispiece, "The body within which I cast the shadow," from *The Divine Comedy*, is a perfect epigraph for this study of Dante's textual physiognomy. Hans Belting in his new "anthropological image theory," explicates Dante's use of shadow and body imagery in *The Divine Comedy* and summarizes that Dante's "picture theory [...] pursued the double strategy of defining the image both in *analogy to the shadow* and, equally, in *opposition to the body*. [...] Time and again, the shadow, as a natural image of the body, has guided the human production of images. It is both the affirmation and the negation of the body, it both denotes and obscures the body."⁷² For Dante, the image is the shadow. But Dante's body has passed into the shadow world of images, and they have become the only reality left, that both denote and obscure his real body and his "body" of work. In the realm of images, the artist is king, and while this fact has led to centuries of sharpening Dante's hatchet profile, simplifying our reading of his work, it also means that innovative artists, like Rossetti, can create new images, new bodies, and essentially make a new life.

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⁷¹ William Michael Rossetti, *Bibliography of the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Ellis, 1905), 43.

⁷² Belting, *Anthropology of Images*, 128.

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