Dante in the fine arts of the nineteenth century

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Surprising as it may seem, until the 1820s people read Dante (he was part of the standard syllabus of Humanities) but no one painted him. And we will see that the idea of composing a large-format picture based on the *Divine Comedy* came to an 'agitator' who aimed to cause a scandal while remaining within the limits of the tolerable: we are in 1822, the agitator in question is called Delacroix, and his canvas is entitled *Dante and Virgil*. Before this date, which created a precedent, artists had limited themselves to illustrating Dante's text in engravings, among them John Flaxman and William Blake.

Visually speaking, then, Dante's output came into existence only very belatedly, whereas from the sixteenth century onwards it featured in a significant position, not to say the very front rank, in the western cultural pantheon. Indeed, beginning with the Venetian edition of 1555, was not the very title of his key text extended by an epithet that placed it above everything else? His *Commedia* was henceforth to be known as 'the' *Divine Comedy,* thus endorsing Boccaccio's designation of the poem. As to the author, Raphael had accorded him the supreme honour in his fresco *Parnassus* (1510 - 11) at the Vatican Palace [page 67]: he was the only Modern to figure among the Ancients on the top of Mount Parnassus, to the left of Apollo surrounded by the Muses, in the centre of a group of three with Homer and Virgil. Dante is seen in profile, climbing Mount Parnassus to

meet Homer (the foundational poet par excellence) and Virgil, not quite on the same plane as them yet, but nearly so. This detail is important.

It is not only that it conveys Dante's precedence over all the Moderns (indeed, he is better placed than most of the classical authors, the majority of whom are relegated to the lower corners). It also supposes that a very special role is reserved for him. The almost completed ascent speaks of the promise of a new Golden Age (the Renaissance, still to come *circa* 1300, but already well underway in 1510) of which he, Dante, was regarded as the initiator. The divine Florentine was viewed as serving as an intermediary between the Ancients and the Moderns according to a cyclic notion of history as consisting in an alternation of phases of progress and decline. While still belonging to the age of darkness (the Middle Ages), Dante was supposedly the first to announce the return of the happy time. Was that not how he saw it himself, addressing Virgil in these terms, as if he owed nothing to his contemporaries or his immediate predecessors?

> You are my master and my author.
> You are the one from whom alone I took
> the noble style that has brought me honour.
> (*Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, Canto I, lines 85-87)

From Raphael to Ingres, from sixteenth-century Italy to nineteenth-century France, the filiation is direct – 'Raphael is God come down to earth', said Ingres – and the tone does not vary one iota. Ingres's *The Apotheosis of Homer* (1827) grants Dante the same privileged status in the allegory of the history of the arts and letters. We find him once more on the left-hand side of the composition, seen from the waist up, between the lower level, allotted to the Moderns, who are shown head-and-shoulders like spectators, and the Ancients, portrayed full length, who form a circle around Homer. Virgil has an arm around his shoulder, and he alone is among both the Ancients and the Moderns, the figure who forms the link between them. Except that, just above him, we see Raphael guided by Apelles, completely integrated with the Ancients; from which

we conclude that there is a Modern more advanced than Dante in terms of the return to Antiquity ... But setting aside Ingres's personal cult of Raphael, the important thing here is the consensus established around the figure of Dante: he has been crowned Prince of Poets of the modern era. The tutelary father of the Renaissance, as it were. And, on this point, Ingres and Delacroix were in agreement. Even if Delacroix said it in his own, inevitably controversial way: 'Without Dante, Giotto does not count' (*Journal*, 4 May 1853). In other words: I, a painter, acknowledge that my art owes everything to poetry.

The fact remains that, from Raphael to Ingres, Dante was present in all minds yet completely absent from museums, except when it came to the pantheon of illustrious men. Why was it seemingly impossible to paint works based on Dante's œuvre until the famous bombshell of 1822, this 'picture by a young man that was a revolution' (Baudelaire, *Exposition universelle de 1855*)? Clearly Delacroix was the only one daring enough to translate the *Divine Comedy* into painting. Was this the talisman of the liberated Moderns (the Romantics) in their enterprise of undermining the classical theoretical edifice? Odilon Redon states quite plainly that if the *Dante and Virgil* of Delacroix marked a milestone in history, it was principally thanks to its subject: this painting 'is modern because it takes after Dante himself, and because that immense mind, perhaps the most astonishing of all ... that great Tuscan genius, I say, was still powerful enough to be present among us in our time' (*À soi-même*, 1878). According to this view, Delacroix owed everything to the *Divine Comedy*.

It is true that Dante's magnum opus fitted fairly smoothly into the anti-classical project of hybridisation of the genres nurtured by the likes of Delacroix or Hugo (the Preface to *Cromwell*, 1827). In this triptych that transports the reader from the realm of sinners (*Inferno*) to that of repentance (*Purgatorio*) and finally to contemplation of eternal truth (*Paradiso*), every register is solicited – low (elegy), medium (comedy), high (tragedy) – and the sublime constantly rubs shoulders with the grotesque. At one point, the grandiose vision of threatening demons closes strangely as they scatter ('They wheeled round by the dike toward the left, / but first each pressed

a tongue between his teeth / to blow a signal to their leader; / and he had made a trumpet of his arse', *Inferno*, Canto XXI, lines 136-139). Later, a scene of horror ends on an obscene gesture ('At the end of his words, the thief / raised both his hands and made the figs', *Inferno*, Canto XXV, lines 1-2). Incidentally, Delacroix often deplored the 'improvements' made to the text by translators who could not bear the crudeness of such lines. 'It must be admitted', he wrote, 'that our Moderns (I speak of such men as Racine or Voltaire) were not acquainted with this variety of the Sublime, these astonishing naïvetés that poeticise vulgar details, turn them into paintings for the imagination, and delight it' (*Journal*, 3 September 1858). For the taste of an *honnête homme* of 1820, Dante was not 'reasonable', and that is precisely why Delacroix, who 'didn't like reasonable painting' (*Journal*, 7 May 1824), esteemed him so highly.

To set the *Divine Comedy* to images was to take risks, both because the subject was new, and because it was 'enormous': it assembles everything that the western world had been capable of imagining (ancient myths, Christian cosmogony, Greco-Roman and medieval history). In short, its material was inexhaustible, its horizon infinite. What a contrast with the classical Humanities (and above all the modern French classics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) built on rigour, logic, order and concision (think, for example, of the rule of the three unities in Racinian drama)! For the visual artist, to draw on the *Divine Comedy* allowed one to break free from the usages inherited from masters recognised as such by legitimate authority: the Academy, the School. To makes one's profession as a history painter while associating with Dante boiled down to postulating the possibility of a non-academic history painting. And then, did Dante not excite artists' temerity? Acknowledging that one can believe more easily in what one sees than what one reads, the poet constantly defers to his readers' eyes. How could painters have resisted such encouragement?

> Look well, therefore: for you will see such things
> as are not easily believed from speech alone.
> (*Inferno*, Canto XIII, lines 20-21)

> [I] saw a thing I would be loath
> to mention without further proof,
> but that my conscience reassures me.
> (*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 113-115)

Or again, in the last canto of the *Inferno*, to describe the effect produced on him by the sight of Lucifer's infernal city:

> Do not ask, reader, for I do not write it,
> since any words would fail to be enough.
> (*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, lines 23-24)

The fabulous world Dante describes obviously had the wherewithal to fire the painter's imagination. But, above all, there is the fact that we have here the poetic 'I' used for the first time in Romance literature. The creator depicting himself. This 'I' with universal value entrusted the artist with a quasi-divine mission, that of illuminator and denigrator of the world of today and prophet of the world to come. Dante is the chosen one who has been permitted to traverse the three realms (Hell, Purgatory, Heaven) in earthly form, while still living. He therefore brings testimony of the living among the dead and, conversely, of the dead among the living. Was this not the image of the artist that was forged in the nineteenth century, that of the great initiate fatally misunderstood by his contemporaries, forging ahead of them, at the 'avant-garde' of society? Dante the committed, proscribed poet fascinated the writers of those modern times who were condemned to exile. Mme de Staël and Victor Hugo identified with him. Balzac made him a character in his novel *Les Proscrits* (1831).

Unbridled imagination and the myth of the *artiste maudit*: here are two characteristics of the Romantic sensibility. There remain the inversion of values and the question of the antihero: the first two panels of the triptych that forms the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* and *Purgatorio*) fell into the category of the anti-subject for the history painter, traditionally called on to illustrate examples of the virtues. But, in the nineteenth century,

the *Paradiso* found little favour with visual artists. The *Purgatorio* barely roused greater interest: was it perhaps not monstrous enough? It is not insignificant that when a pupil of Ingres (Hippolyte Flandrin) dared to tackle the *Divine Comedy*, he turned his attention to the *Purgatorio*, the lesser evil as it were (contrary to what its title implies, his *Dante and Virgil in Hell* illustrates Canto XIII of the ... *Purgatorio*). And moreover, like a good 'classicist', Flandrin purges the episode in question of the slightest note that might run counter to the 'Beau idéal'. The viewer will not see the sewed-up eyes of the sinners mentioned by Dante ('an iron wire pierces all their eyelids, / and stitches them together, as is done / to the untamed falcon that will not stay still', *Purgatorio*, Canto XIII, lines 70-72). The 'Romantics', for their part, opted for the *Inferno*, and there, when it came to horror or ugliness, they were spoilt for choice, since the damned are punished, following the principle of mimesis (or, as Dante puts it, the *lex talionis*), according to the nature of their sin ('The rigid justice that torments me / takes its occasion from the place I sinned / to make my sighs come faster', *Inferno*, Canto XXX, lines 70-71). The punishments are therefore as varied as the crimes ... One who fomented the sedition of son against father is decapitated:

> Because I severed beings so conjoined,
> severed, alas, I carry my own brain
> from its origin that lies in this trunk;
> thus retribution may be observed in me.
> (*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 139-142)

Others, who have strayed from the true faith, are 'schismatised' (that is, cut in two down the middle):

> There is a devil here behind,
> who schismatises us so cruelly,
> putting each one to the sword's point once more
> as soon as we have done our doleful round:

for all our wounds have closed again
before we come once more in front of him.
(*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 37-42)

Although the two scenes above were never actually painted – it is hard to see how they could have been without lapsing into a certain absurdity – our artists finally found worse yet: anthropophagy (Gianni Schicchi, Ugolino). The plastic treatment of the subject took the form of oxymoron with William Bouguereau [page 25], who combines the height of horror (a damned soul ripping open another's throat with his teeth) and the formal perfection of the figures seen in strict profile and moving in a very abstract circular rhythm. But, over and above the sensationalism of shocking images that seize the attention of visitors to art exhibitions, does the *Divine Comedy* not take on a much more subversive dimension from its very narrator, Dante in person? That the spectacle is a dreadful one is something that goes without saying. But that the great man should lose his dignity, and should lead the reader into his wicked passions by proxy, is quite inadmissible. Yet the itinerary of the visitor to Hell in many respects resembles a moral fall. First there is the excessive curiosity of the narrator. Dante admits several times to being devoured by the urge to see a little more ('The souls that lie within the sepulchres, / may they be seen? For all the lids are raised, / and no one there is standing guard', *Inferno*, Canto X, lines 7-9). Worse, he acquires a taste for this spectacle and asks for more ('And I said: "Master, I would greatly like / to see him soused in this broth / before we leave the lake"', *Inferno*, Canto VIII, lines 52-54). And, finally, having reached the lowest depths of Hell, Dante loses all humanity. He tortures one of its recalcitrant inmates with his own hands:

Then I seized him by the scruff of the neck
and said: 'Either you must name yourself,
or not a single hair will remain there!'
[...]

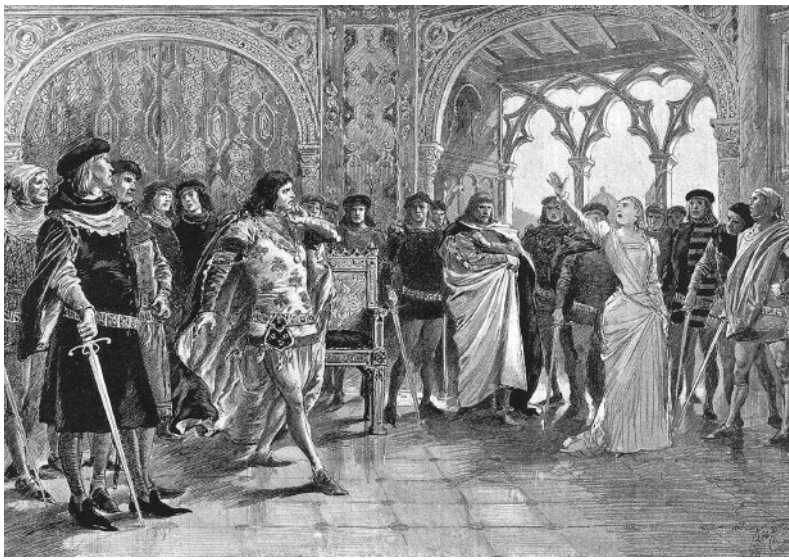
> Now I had his hair twisted in my hand
> and had already plucked more tufts than one
> while he howled with his eyes cast down.
> (*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 97-99, 103-105)

Dante's future redemption (in the *Paradiso*) justifies this moral failure in the text of the *Inferno*, but since painting belongs to the arts of space and not of time, on canvas the divine poet remains for ever compromised. Can it be that Dante personifies the figure of the antihero? At this stage of the discussion, our reader has a better idea of why the *Divine Comedy* was never painted in large format before Delacroix. But Delacroix hit hard right away, for he interpolated a scene of cannibalism still to come into an episode (the crossing of the lake surrounding the infernal city of Dis) that did not include it in the original [page 41]. What Géricault, though authorised by the facts of the case, had refused to show in *The Raft of the Medusa* at the previous Salon (1819), Delacroix literally thrusts in the spectator's face in 1822: the motif of two figures devouring each other visible in the lower right-hand corner is situated exactly at the viewer's eye level. This scene of unprecedented violence is all the more prominent since, in this part of the composition, the boat in the median plane seems to pivot, slightly increasing the perspective and, as a result, further detaching these two cannibals from the rest of the picture. Isolated on the lower edge of the canvas, the two heads go almost out of frame. With deliberate irrele-vance, Delacroix uses them as a binding agent between the virtual space of the painted image and the real space of the viewer. Yes, there was certainly an element of calculation in Delacroix's choice of Dante for the only painting he exhibited at the Salon that year. In so doing, he was staking his all ('I'm trying my luck', he wrote). The *Inferno* proved to be scandalous in its content yet at the same time, by the very fact of its status as a classic, a useful bulwark against criticism. With the *Divine Comedy*, Delacroix knew precisely just how provocative he could be without going too far.

Hence the œuvre of Dante was to constitute the cornerstone of a renewed conception of tradition, a tradition no longer understood as a corpus of rules to be respected, as had been the case until then, but akin, on the contrary, to a succession of deviations from the rules. The tradition of the rupture was born. Seventy-eight years later, at the hands of Rodin this time, Dante (now transmogrified into *The Thinker*) and his *Divine Comedy* were to be the source of another milestone in art history: *The Gates of Hell*, the chief attraction of the pavilion of the Pont de l'Alma on the fringes of the Exposition Universelle of 1900. In the meantime, the Florentine poet and his work (whether the *Divine Comedy* or the *Vita nova*) had become the daily bread of visual artists, for better or for worse.

The 'better' might well be the English Pre-Raphaelites and, first and foremost, the painter and poet (and translator of the *Vita nova*) Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Britain lacked a solid tradition of history painting, and its artists tended to favour instead the sentimental vein of the Dantean corpus. Through the unhappy love of Dante and Beatrice (or Paolo and Francesca), Rossetti and his disciples succeeded in marrying genre painting and poetry, a hybridisation unknown to the French. The 'worse' would be the sensational pictures that sought to attract the spectator's gaze through spectacular effects. Gustave Moreau was roused to indignation by the success Gustave Doré's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* achieved: 'Dante by Doré, the masterpiece for the lamplighter at the Porte Saint-Martin or the stage-hand at the Gaîté' (*Écrits*, 1862). He little knew how true he spoke. To force fate's hand and reach out to an unlettered public, history painters were to make excessive use of theatrical machinery such as the trapdoor, which Doré had been the first to depict. The Salon painter had an immoderate penchant for subjects on the borderlines of taste, those of the last cantos of the *Inferno* where the crescendo of horror reaches its culmination. And to illustrate this, what better example than the immense *Dante and Virgil in the Ninth Circle of Hell*, which Doré exhibited at the Salon of 1861 [page 41]?

… I saw two frozen in a single hole,
so that the head of one was the other's hat:
and as a hungry man will gnaw at bread,
the one above had set his teeth in the other
at that place where the brain joins with the neck.
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 125-129)



Beatrice's oath at the end of the Act II finale.
Le Théâtre illustré, 1890. Private collection.

Serment de Béatrice concluant le finale de l'acte II.
Le Théâtre illustré, 1890. Collection particulière.