DANTE’S HELL ENVISIONED BY GUSTAV DORÉ: AN OVERLOOKED OPENING TO MODERNITY

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Abstract: Published in numerous editions starting in 1814, Rev Francis Cary’s translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy had an impressive impact during the nineteenth century. It was not until it was illustrated by Gustav Doré in 1866, however, that Dante’s imagery opened a decisive path towards modernity. By reshaping specific medieval motifs, Doré’s vision of Dante’s Inferno gave them a new life in the visual arts. Doré thus acted as a middleman between Dante and Frederic Leighton, Edward Burne-Jones, and Gustav Klimt, to mention only a few of the modernists influenced by the Dante-Doré co-production.

Key words: illustration, Divina Commedia, Pre-Raphaelite poetics, Frederic Leighton, Gustave Doré, Dante Alighieri, Cassell, Petter, and Galpin Press

Dante Alighieri was one of the most-cited writers by Victorian elites (writers and artists, politicians and historians, journalists as well as art and literary critics), together with Milton and Shakespeare.2 Dante was also the most inspiring model for the nineteenth-century poets, irrespective of their literary programs: Romantics, Pre-Raphaelites, Victorians, and Decadents. At the same time, artists representing all these trends translated into artworks scenes from Dante’s major work, Divine Comedy. Nineteenth-century England, more than Italy, transformed Dante Alighieri into a cultural icon.

In spite of the fact that the first reference to Divina Commedia was made by Geoffrey Chaucer in The House of Fame sometime between the late 1370s and the early 1380s (Havely 229), the first complete English translation of the poem, by Henry Boyd, was published only in 1802. The second complete translation was self-published by Reverend Henry Francis Cary in 1814 under the title The Vision, or Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise of Dante Alighieri. Favorably received by critics, this monumental translation did not immediately attract a large number of readers. It took Coleridge’s active promotion of Cary’s translation to turn it into the best-

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1 University of Washington, Seattle, WA.
2 In 1854, Sydney Thompson Dobell published “Balder,” a poem in which Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton were praised for their powerful depictions of spiritual and material worlds. For Dobell, Dante excelled in describing Hell, Shakespeare excelled in “draw[ing] the Earth,” while Milton, “sole standing on a peak supreme,” was the poet of the soul: “Incessant carried up to heaven, and plunged / To darkness” (90-91). Although Dobell’s poem was not unanimously praised by critics, major writers of the time, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Charlotte Brönte amongst the most important, found it representative of their values. See The Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell. Ed. Emily Jolly. (London: Smith, Elder, 1878).
seller of the century. According to Valeria Tinkler-Villani, after Coleridge met Cary in 1817 and received a copy of the complete translation, the romantic poet "began to quote and mention Dante repeatedly as a central point of comparison with English writers in his lectures on Milton and Shakespeare" (180). More importantly for Cary, Coleridge praised the translation of Dante in two of his lectures on European literature delivered at the Royal Institution in February 1818 and in March 1819. With Coleridge publicly on his side, the number of critics interested in Cary’s translation increased tremendously, culminating with a series of articles published by Ugo Foscolo, a close friend of Coleridge, in the prestigious Edinburgh Review. It was the support of Coleridge and Foscolo that, finally, boosted the sale of the first edition. Following Coleridge’s suggestion to add explanatory notes and to write an introduction on Dante’s life and work, Cary succeeded in selling out the 1819 edition very short order.

With the large circulation of Cary’s translation, readers could easily identify echoes from Dante in the later works of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats (Braida 5). The impact of Dante on English literature after Cary’s rendition of Divine Comedy in Miltonic free verse appeared has been studied closely. The impact of Cary’s translation on English art, however, has not yet been analyzed, not even in connection with Dürer’s illustrations, which brought both Dante and Cary to a new best-selling record. Tinkler-Villani discusses Cary’s title Vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise in the context of the poetry of vision – Blake, Southey, and Byron – and in the context of Newtonian physics for which “vision” was the most direct path to knowledge. The critic considers that “vision” suggested a “greater role on the part of the author, who is also the protagonist, and also greater distance between the real world on the one hand, and on the other, the world of the poem, which loses its objective reality and is absorbed within the poet’s imaginings” (179). It might have been Cary’s choice of the title Vision of … as well as his faithful translation of Dante’s vivid imagery into an equally vivid imagery.

3 Coleridge delivered his lectures on the Divine Comedy on 27 February 1818 and on 11 March 1819. Years later, Cary’s son recalled that after Coleridge’s first lecture and Foscolo’s review, both from February 1818, “a thousand copies of the first edition, that remained in hand, were immediately disposed of; in less than three months a new edition was called for” (Memoir 2: 28).

English equivalent that drew the attention of Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, the publishers who sponsored the edition illustrated by Gustave Doré.

Cassell, Petter, and Galpin Press entered the market in 1858. In the extremely competitive publishing market they needed to make themselves known. As Cassell’s great success with The Illustrated Exhibitor, A Tribute to the World’s Industrial Jubilee of 1851 “demonstrated the profitability of publications richly adorned with woodcuts” (Holloway 5), the three partners decided to continue to print illustrated books. At Cassell’s initiative, in 1859, the press took their contemporaries by surprise with the unprecedented weekly sales of 300,000 copies of the Illustrated Family Bible printed in one-penny numbers. This success encouraged them to pursue and even expand their collection of illustrated books.5 According to The Story of the House of Cassell, the greatest achievement of the press was “to have secured Doré’s services at all” (54). The list of books that Doré illustrated for them began in 1861 with Dante’s Inferno, for which Doré must have given his permission to use the electrotype of the drawings he had made for the French edition of 1857. The list of the resulting series of publications, all of which use Doré’s art, includes Cervantes’s Don Quixote, Dante’s Purgatorio and Paradiso, The Bible, La Fontaine’s Fables, The Adventures of Baron Münchausen, The Wandering Jew, and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Dante’s Comedy, then, was part of their plan to ensure the financial stability of their firm. The list of the works published by Cassell, Petter, and Galpin with Doré’s illustrations draws attention to the feature these works share: their grotesque corporeality and their fantastic creativity.

The documents relating to the press compiled in The Story of the House of Cassell show that Cassell went to Paris and visited Doré’s studio to settle the business in 1859. Among the hundreds of drawings scattered around the studio, witnesses of an amazing imagination and a compulsion to work, the English publisher must have felt that he had found a profitable treasure. To his credit, when he proposed to his partners to ask Doré to become their permanent collaborator, Doré’s talent as an illustrator had not yet received official recognition. It was not until 1861 – after Doré had started his work for the English publishers – that the French government made Doré “chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur” as a result of the international praise of his designs for the Dante editions published in Germany, Italy, Denmark, and England.

For the English readers in particular, Doré’s illustrations of Dante’s Inferno offered a new approach to the aesthetic category of the grotesque that was defined by John Ruskin in his early works and to the spiritual purity that Pre-Raphaelites identified with medieval authors and artists. Ruskin felt that Doré challenged his aesthetic, which relied very much on the demonstration that there were two types of grotesque. According to Ruskin, the noble grotesque

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5 The Story of the House of Cassell mentions that the popularity of the illustrated bible reached as far as the “backwoods of America”; a missionary from the American “Far West” sent 10 names of “Red Indian” subscribers emphasizing that “the engravings would ‘command their interest and attention where nothing else will’” (32).
characterized medieval works, the only expressions of authentic emotions; the false
or ignoble grotesque characterized Renaissance works, representations of moral
and spiritual degradation. Ruskin’s harsh condemnation of the Renaissance was the
leit-motif of his works from the 1840s and 1850s, beginning with the first two
volumes of his Modern Painters and continuing with the three volumes of The
Stones of Venice and the final two volumes of Modern Painters. After Doré’s
illustrations for Dante’s Inferno received mostly laudatory reviews, Ruskin realized
“the corruption of his own ideas,” as Wyam Herendeen put it. In “The Doré
Controversy: Doré, Ruskin, and Victorian Taste,” Herendeen noticed that the
paradigm shift from Ruskin’s limiting program that praised exclusively primitivism
in art to the liberating modernist aesthetics that brought about Impressionist
experiments coincided with Doré’s overwhelming success in England. As
Herendeen wrote, “as the century advanced and the Impressionists usurped the
place of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, his [Ruskin’s] theories became outmoded.
[...] His disillusion and sense of failure intensified during the sixties, finding its
most eloquent expression in 1868, in lecture three of Sesame and Lilies, ‘Of the
Misery of Life’” (322). Although Herendeen is not interested in demonstrating how
Doré’s presence on the Victorian artistic stage influenced Dante Gabriel Rossetti,
the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, to change his style, he emphasizes Doré’s
contribution to enriching and refreshing the artistic vocabulary of the era.

Even a superficial evaluation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s career indicates
that between 1861 and 1864 the artist drastically changed his style. Alicia Craig
Faxon considers that the medieval “dream” ended with Elizabeth Siddall’s death in
1862. The critic tries to explain Rossetti’s infatuation with Venetian Renaissance
masters, pointing out that the exhibition of Venetian painters Titian and Tintoretto
was on display in London at Hampton Court and that Burne-Jones returned from
Italy in 1861 with lots of sketches after Venetian masterpieces and fresh memories
of the works he examined. What Faxon ignores completely is the ubiquity of
Doré’s illustrations and the continuous conversation about them in artistic milieus
and journals. Rossetti’s illustrations for his sister’s Goblin Market, for example,
show some interesting resemblances with some of Doré’s illustrations. Although
influences of the Italian Renaissance, mostly Venetian, became apparent in 1859 in
Rossetti’s Bocca Baciata, they were not consistent. In spite of the fact that there
are no direct references – as far as I know – to Doré’s illustrations in Dante Gabriel
Rossetti’s letters, it cannot be inferred that he did not see them or read about them.
Rossetti himself, as a translator of Dante’s Vita Nuova and of the poets from
Dante’s entourage, that is as a poet and a painter who paid tribute to his master,
could not have missed the shock produced by Doré’s representations of Dante.6

6 In his extensive article for the December 1862 issue of Sharpe’s London Magazine of
Entertainment and Instruction for General Reading, J.R. Ware describes Londoners’
reaction to Gustave Doré’s illustrations hanging in the Hachette bookstore’s window in
Kind William street: “These specimens seem really to hit pedestrians, who pull up, as it
were, with sudden astonishment.” The critic concludes that the artist is “beyond a doubt, a
genius” (297). In January 1862, The Critic published the article “Art and Artists” in which
the anonymous author praised Doré’s illustrations as the “nearest approach to a sustained
Whereas Rossetti preferred a hieratic simplicity of design and pastel colors, Doré exhibited a voluptuous corporeality suggesting through nuances of gray even more intense colors than Rossetti had ever used in his early paintings. Doré challenged the Ruskinian principle of “fidelity to nature” that Victorians were accustomed to identify in the works of Rossetti, Hunt, and Millais. For Doré, “fidelity to nature” had a different meaning: it did not refer to the spiritual, divine, or moral aspect of nature that had been served by detailed delineations in visual representations; instead, it related to nature itself; nature in its non-idealized shape, natura naturans, to use Spinoza’s phrase. The term “grotesque” gained a new meaning as well. It came to indicate repulsiveness that resulted from monstrous, yet tempting, aspects of the human condition to which Victorians had not been exposed previously. Herendeen analyzes the confusion created by Doré, who used “acceptable Ruskinian qualities, such as precise descriptive fidelity, the grotesque, the emphasis on feeling and power, but in unorthodox contexts and combinations” (320). Of course, Doré was oblivious to the fact that his style stirred old aesthetic conundrums for Victorians who were familiar with Ruskin’s concepts. What Doré did was to cause a crisis of Victorian taste.

Readers had in front of them a text and its visual interpretation, both of which invited a plurality of reactions. First, Dante’s text delivers two points of view: that of the pilgrim, who, as a sinful mortal himself, is moved by other sinful mortals’ destinies and their eternal punishment; and also that of the writer, who, as someone beyond mortality, was fully in charge of his text even though he populates and structures Hell in accordance with his epoch’s values, historical background, and religious imagery. In addition to these two interwoven perspectives, each of which invites a different emotional reaction from the reader, Doré placed his versions alternatively next to Dante the pilgrim and next to the table where the writer/painter of Hell “transcribed” his vision. The initial ambivalence of the text is increased by Doré’s illustrations. As William Cole explains in “Literal Art? A New Look at Doré’s Illustrations for Dante’s Inferno,” Doré chose to “interact” with the text and “countered the literal meaning of Dante’s words without detracting from or changing the intent” (99). Analyzing at length Doré’s depiction of the Avaricious and the Prodigal, and Caiaphas and the hypocrites, Cole realizes that the artist reformulated the text visually to the point where the visual representation was no longer a representation of the text, but rather a work that could easily become autonomous. The fact that Doré requested his publishers to print the Dante edition in the folio format, with illustrations as big as 18 x 33 cm (13 x 17 inches), is another argument that the illustrator treated his designs as
equals of the text they faced, yet with their own individuality. Aida Audeh considers that Doré reversed the roles between text and image by expanding the size of illustrations to full-page, folio format, illustrations that “dominate each canto” (129). It was the folio format that made the illustration overwhelm the text, and not necessarily the fact that they occupied the same space the text did. As a side note, Millais’ illustrations for Trollope’s *Framley Parsonage*, for example, covered a full page as well in the *Cornhill Magazine* serial, but the page was an octavo and the illustration was 15.8 x 10.2 cm (6.2 x 4 inches). Audeh is right when she emphasizes that “Doré was well aware of the importance of this shift” (130) and cites as supporting evidence one of Doré’s contemporaries, Lorédan-Lachey, who criticized Doré for the fact that the illustrations competed with the text to the point that “[m]ore than Dante illustrated by Doré, it is Doré illustrated by Dante” (Audeh 130).

Furthermore, Doré chose the place where his illustrations were supposed to be inserted. One may say that he took over the format – the physicality – of Dante’s text in order to compensate, at least visually, the control Dante exerted over the content of the text. Doré actually staged his illustrations by slicing up the text to suit his visual interpretation and by adding another function to the tissue paper that was normally inserted between folios and meant to protect the images. In regard to the manner in which Doré broke the text into portions between illustrations in the French editions, Cole demonstrates that Doré employed a “cliffhanger” strategy when he portioned the text so that his reader would look forward to encountering the image. In regard to the tissue paper, the critic suggests that some of them were used to dislocate and relocate short fragments of text: “the protective sheets … have a few verses on them, ostensibly to give us a point of reference,” although “if we have not yet arrived at the passage in question – as is sometimes the case – they can confuse us” (105). Doré asked the printers to inscribe the lines that matched the illustration onto the protective tissues in order to increase the emotion of the viewer / reader even more by superimposing the text on top of the image and thus blurring both the linguistic and the visual code. The tissue paper functioned as a curtain in a theatre that unveiled the episode that was taking place in front of the viewer as the viewer was trying to make sense of the lines he had just read on the “curtain.” For example, the third illustration of Canto V, showing Francesca and Paolo in their eternal embrace, came after the following lines:

> “Bard! willingly
> I would address those two together coming
> Which seem so light before the wind.” (72-4)²

³ “Doré insisted on full-page illustrations – a break from previous illustrated books of the nineteenth century that afforded only in-text vignettes – that signified a shift in perception regarding the relation of text and image” (129).

² The British Library holds a copy of *The Doré Gallery* in which prints are separated by a tissue paper on which two or three lines are inscribed as captions.

³ These lines are printed on the tissue paper that protects the third print in the British Library copy of *The Doré Gallery* (London: Cassell, 1889).
There is no indication about the characters’ clothes or body posture in the text. What Doré shows his readers is a sensual embrace placed right in the center of the page, with Francesca’s naked body capturing the only beam of light in the composition, which otherwise displays a thick darkness.


Their pain does not seem to be caused by their punishment, the continuous rotation in the swirl, but by the impossibility of facing each other and getting hold of each other completely: Francesca has her right hand on Paolo’s neck, barely holding on to him, and Paolo does not seem to be able to support her in any way, as his hands are trapped in the drapery of a cloak. The illustration, however, references in great detail the lines above those on the tissue paper:

I understood that to this torment sad
The carnal sinners are condemn’d, in whom
Reason by lust is sway’d. As in large troops
And multitudinous, when winter reigns,
The starlings on their wings are borne abroad;
So bears the tyrannous gust those evil souls.
On this side and on that, above, below,
It drives them: hope of rest to solace them
Is none, nor e'en of milder pang. As cranes,
Chanting their dol'rous notes, traverse the sky,
Stretch'd out in long array: so I beheld
Spirits, who came loud wailing, hurried on
By their dire doom. (38-50)

The flesh of “the carnal sinners,” as well as the wretchedness of their “evil souls”
cannot be missed in the Renaissance-inspired composition that imagined both the
sin and the punishment. Doré adds a detail that did not appear in the text:
Francesca’s wound. Between her breasts, there is a small cut from which two
trickles of blood run down on her body, the symbolic stigmas of eternal love that
cannot be stopped by death. 10 In addition, the physicality of the folio edition – its
size and weight – emphasizes the beautiful corporeality of the two bodies, mostly
Francesca’s. Her body is fully exposed as if a statue of Venus. Like a statue,
Francesca’s weight seems to make her almost slip from Paolo’s grasp. Perhaps it is
her desperation not to be separated from Paolo that readers can see on her face and
can almost hear emanating from her open mouth.

Compared with Rossetti’s 1855 watercolor depicting the same episode,
Doré’s, although it lacks the chromatic spectrum, is much more “colorful” in his
nuances of gray. 11 In Rossetti’s triptych, Paolo and Francesca appear twice: kissing
over the open book and flying in the swirl. In both instances they are perfectly
dressed and their emotions perfectly contained. Rossetti, consistent with his
medieval poetics of the 1850s, flattened the composition, and consequently avoided
any suggestion of corporeality or movement. Furthermore, he placed Dante and
Virgil in the central panel, turned towards the two lovers so that they can see better
the plight of the doomed. The interest of Dante and Virgil embarrasses Francesca
and Paolo, who have their eyes closed as if they are ashamed of their sin and do not
want to see the blame or the pity either in each other’s eyes or in the eyes of their
spectators. Doré’s Francesca, however, is looking almost ecstatically at Paolo with
no shame in her nudity, passion, or sin. The two representations of Canto V
exemplify the two types of “grotesque”: Rossetti’s triptych stands for the ideal
grotesque, Doré’s illustration for the low, ignoble grotesque.

10 The small wound on Francesca’s chest was likely inspired by Ary Scheffer’s painting,
The Ghosts of Paolo and Francesca Appear to Dante and Virgil (1855), which Doré saw in
Paris at the Salon. However, Scheffer chose to place Francesca’s wound on her back and
Paolo’s on the front. Even though Doré might have taken the idea of representing
Francesca’s wound from Scheffer, he transformed the marginal, almost imperceptible motif
of stigmata into a central, extremely visible detail that carried the meaning of the image.

11 Doré actually used to paint his compositions first and trained his engravers to transfer the
colors onto the lines of the woodblocks.
In spite of the fact that Rossetti had a huge influence on his friends and was considered the Dante scholar of the circle, his expertise did not stop Edward Burne-Jones from looking for another artistic role model. Initially influenced by Rossetti’s hieratic medievalism, towards the end of the 1860s Burne-Jones was attracted by Doré’s massive representations of corporeality and the motif of the tragic embrace. Although most art critics consider that his interest in explicit nudity was inspired by Michelangelo, there is enough evidence in his memoirs to indicate that he actually found an intriguing challenge in Doré’s large paintings and folio illustrations after his first two trips to Italy (1859, 1862) during which he copied Italian Renaissance masters attentively. It is possible that it was Doré’s works, with which he became so familiar, that inspired him to visit Italy again in the 1870s.

With the inauguration of the Doré Gallery in New Bond Street, London, in 1867 hundreds of people looked at Doré’s oversized drawings and at his huge oil paintings every day.12 According to Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, more than two and a half million people visited the gallery during the twenty-one years it remained opened (40). Among the enthusiastic visitors was Edward Burne-Jones. The friend and partner of William Morris, Burne-Jones had already drawn seventy illustrations for Morris’ Earthly Paradise. In a conversation of 28 March 1896, Burne-Jones told his assistant, Thomas Rooke, that Doré was “really an imaginative man” and that “out of one thousand and five hundred designs that he [Doré] did a hundred of them are wonderful. Which is saying a very great deal” (Lago 97). Coming from a young artist who started painting more seriously in 1855, this is a compliment that indicates both respect and admiration. Looking closely at Burne-Jones’ paintings before and after his contact with Doré’s works, one may presume that the French artist represented a model figure in certain respects for the Pre-Raphaelite follower. His paintings suddenly and drastically increased their size: from the small pen and ink drawings such as The King’s Farewell and Going to the Battle, and the very elaborate watercolor Sidonia von Bork that was only 33 x 17 cm (13 x 6 ¾ inches), Burne-Jones evolved to the big canvases of the late 1860s and later: Green Summer from 1868 (oil, 64.7 x 106.1 cm / 25.5 x 41.8 inches), the diptychs Spring and Autumn from 1869-70 (gouache, 122.5 x 45 cm / 48.2 x 17.7 inches) and Day and Night from 1870 (watercolor and gouache, 120.7 x 44.4 cm / 47.5 x 17.5 inches), culminating with the oils The Golden Stairs from 1872-80 (277 x 117 cm / 109 x 46 inches), The Wheel of Fortune from 1875-83 (199 x 100 cm / 78.35 x 39.4 inches), Tree of Forgiveness from 1881-82 (190.5 x 106.7 cm / 75 x 42 inches), or the unusually big watercolor The Depth of the Sea from 1887 (169.4 x 75.8 cm / 66.7 x 29.8 inches).

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12 According to Haupt, the Gallery opened in 1867. Penelope Fitzgerald also suggests that the Doré Gallery was opened in that year. She mentions Ruskin’s lecture “On the Present State of Modern Art,” which the art critic delivered at the British Institution in June of that year and in which he contrasted Burne-Jones with Doré, making references to the works that must have been accessible to Ruskin in London at that time. However, according to Mary Lago, the editor of Burne-Jones’ conversations recorded by his assistant, Thomas Rooke, the gallery opened in 1868.
Burne-Jones’ Tree of Forgiveness and The Depth of the Sea develop further the motif of an uncomfortable, almost tragic, embrace. Tree of Forgiveness of 1882 is a later version of Phyllis and Demophoon of 1870. Both versions echo the third and fourth illustrations of Canto V in which Francesca coils her arms around Paolo so vigorously that he grasps the fabric with his left hand as if to free himself from her grip. Her body, like Phyllis’, is partially draped, leaving the upper part uncovered. Burne-Jones placed the completely naked Demopho on right in the center and foreground, focusing viewers’ attention on his attempt to escape from Phyllis’ grasp. The theme of the painting was so harshly criticized that the painter had to withdraw it from the Old Water-Color Society exhibition. The art critic of The Times, for example, wrote that “the idea of love-chase, with a woman follower is not pleasant” (Ash 22); the reviewer of The Examiner and London Review, the April 1870 issue, mocks Burne-Jones for his “eccentric taste” or an eye condition that “subverts the natural laws of the spectrum” and that causes him to see “nothing but green: green flesh tints, green skies, green earth, the high-lights green-yellow, the deep-shades, green-blue” (280). After twelve years, Burne-Jones returned to the subject of the “love-chase” and made the two lovers resemble Doré’s even more closely. In Tree of Forgiveness, the woman has her mouth slightly opened, like Francesca’s in the third illustration, and so does the man. Passion is thus intensified visually. Moreover, the woman is fully naked and so is the man, who has only his genitals covered by a whirl of fabric.

Burne-Jones reapplys the same strategy in The Depths of the Sea in 1887. The embrace, this time, is deadly. The man’s body is dragged down to the bottom of the sea by the mermaid. His arms are immobilized by the mermaid’s grasp the same way Paolo’s arms were pinned by the cloak. Burne-Jones worked with Doré’s iconography, embellishing it in a properly academic style. What looked rough and imperfect as drawing in Doré became impeccable in terms of the classical design in Burne-Jones’ work. Employing only tones of blue and gold, Burne-Jones launched Doré’s motif of the embrace further on to the modernist path of the monochromatically limited compositions of Whistler.

It was no coincidence that two major Victorian painters, Edward Burne-Jones and Frederic Leighton, almost at the same time explored the motif of the deadly embrace using a limited chromatic palette. The fact that both painters addressed topics that required a detailed depiction of drapery made critics consider almost exclusively Italian Renaissance artists as their sources, Michelangelo, par excellence. While the records of the artists’ trips to Italy provide solid evidence for this theory, at the compositional level, the experimentations of Burne-Jones and Leighton with the Francesca and Paolo embrace cannot be justified only by their interest in Michelangelo. Doré’s In spite of the fact that in Leighton’s case, the evidence of his knowledge of Dore is circumstantial as there has not surfaced yet a document in which Leighton acknowledged Doré’s significance; nevertheless, his contact with Doré is undeniable. The nature of Victorian reviews was such that it was practically impossible for Leighton to ignore Doré’s illustrations and their immense success. It is fair to admit that at least And the Sea gave up the Dead Which Were in It is indebted to Dore.
The recurrence of the motif of rising from muddy waters in Doré’s Dante must have drawn Frederic Leighton’s attention. Leighton’s contribution was to reverse the meaning of divine punishment into a resurrection scene in *And the Sea Gave Up the Dead Which Were in It* (1892). My argument that Leighton’s painting is related to four of Doré’s illustrations relies on several details: the man in the center has a healed wound on his chest, yet which is still clearly visible, exactly like Francesca’s; the crowned figure on the left rises from a partially open grave in the same fashion in which Doré represented Farinata (the only difference is that Leighton completely wrapped the dead in sheets and placed the light above in order to emphasize the resurrection; the figure on the right raises his hands to protect his eyes from the bright light like many of the sinners in Doré’s hell who also raise their hands, for example a forger in Canto XXIX, a sower of discord in Canto XXVIII, or one of the blasphemers in Canto XIV.

One detail in particular seems misplaced: the leg of a body on the lower left. Neither the painting as a whole nor the passage from the Apocalypse that inspired it are compatible with the idea that dismembered bodies might come to the surface of the water. In the illustrations of Canto XIX, dedicated to the Simonists, Doré drew, aside Dante and Virgil, only pairs of legs, each in a different position, suggesting somehow the personality of the sinner whose body is otherwise sunk beneath the water. Leonée Ormond indicated Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel as source of inspiration for Leighton’s painting. It is true that Michelangelo was Leighton’s favorite model, but in this case, in addition to the sculptural aspect of the bodies and the drapery, nothing else suggests Michelangelo influence. The motifs that Leighton employed in this huge canvas of 228.5 cm (89.96 inches) diameter come from Doré. A closer study of his preliminary sketches for this painting indicates an even closer affinity with Doré. The sketch 115j in the catalogue of the 1996 exhibition is a close version of Mahomet, the schismatic from Canto XXVIII who is opening his chest with his bare hands. The compositional studies in black and white chalk reminds the viewer of the piles of bodies in Doré-Dante’s hell, while the studies for specific body postures enlarge Doré’s small characters in the crowds of the sinners the artist tried to individualize.

The most spectacular motif in Leighton’s paintings after the 1870s is the swirl of drapery that apparently has nothing to do with the narrative depicted or the symbolic meaning of the image. The swirl is purely a decorative option. In Doré’s illustrations the swirl signifies the inner torment of the punished souls as well as the physical suffering, although Dante’s text is not always specific; in the paintings of Leighton and Burne-Jones, swirls accompany ancient mythological characters more like decorative additions to the scene rather than a realistic depiction of blowing wind or character in motion. Leighton’s *Greek Girls picking up Pebbles by the Sea* (1871), *Hercules Wrestling with Death for the Body of Alcestis* (1871), and *Greek Girls Paying at Ball* (1889), as well as Burne-Jones’ *Perseus series* (1885-88) and *Sponsa de Libano* (1891), use the swirl of cloaks to identify mythological characters. Interestingly, Doré used the swirl to identify Virgil in The Styx – Philippo Argenti (Canto VIII), The tomb of Anastasius (Canto XI), Brunetto
Latini (Canto XV), and Thais (Canto XVIII). In the same illustrations, Dante’s toga hangs straight down, showing no effect from the elements. Is this because Dante belongs to a different era? An era whose art was dominated – in nineteenth-century artists’ opinion – by spiritual values? Indubitably, the swirl became the favorite decorative element of the art nouveau artists, who explored its curvilinear elegance and subliminal sensuality in their compositions to the point where the subject was almost indecipherable.

Among the new artists, the Viennese Secessionist Gustav Klimt developed further Doré’s iconography from Canto V in the huge allegory of Philosophy (1898-1907), commissioned by the Ministry of Culture for the Vienna University building on the Ringstrasse. The group of sinners from Doré’s fourth illustration of Canto V became, in Klimt’s work, a cascade of skinny naked bodies, some of which cling to each other as if in despair. Klimt could have seen Doré’s illustrations in the dozens of German editions circulating before and during the time he started working on The Kiss for the Entire World (1902), one of the frescos of the Beethoven Frieze.13

More or less directly, Klimt absorbed motifs from Dante that had originated initially in Doré’s depictions. The juxtaposition of Klimt’s The Kiss for the Entire World in the Beethoven frieze and Doré’s illustration of Dante and Virgil crossing the Styx in Phlegyas’ boat discloses an unexpected similarity between the male body postures in both. The point of view from which Klimt chose to paint the embracing couple is identical to Doré’s, allowing the viewer to see only the male’s muscular back, which reminds one of Michelangelo’s sculptures. In Klimt’s case, the woman’s arms coiling around the man’s neck seem to be a reference to Dore’s third illustration for Canto V, the embrace of Paolo and Francesca. Klimt’s anonymous couple may or may not be Paolo and Francesca, but the title of the composition, The Kiss for the Entire World, is yet another reference to Dante’s Canto V and to Rodin’s sculpture, The Kiss (1889), which was meant to be a piece in the bass-reliefs of The Gate of the Hell.14 The subject of Francesca and Paolo was not particularly popular with German and Austrian artists, although L. Hoffmann-Zeitz and Wilhelm Trubner from Munich, and K. Kaiser from Dresden approached the subject at the end of the nineteenth century. However, in spite (or perhaps because) of this, Klimt did make it the central piece of his frieze.

In “Gustav Klimt’s Beethoven’s Frieze: Evolution and Program,” Stephan Koja focuses on visual elements that prepared visitors of the 1902 exhibition to

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13 In the first two decades of the twentieth century, fifteen new German editions of Dore’s Dante were printed, according to Dan Malan (97).
14 Furthermore, Klimt, the first president of the Secessionist group that Hermann Bahr defined as “typically Austrian Art Nouveau” in 1899 (Bouillon 8), was acquainted with August Rodin’s works, among which The Friends and The Hero were exhibited in Vienna in 1898. These two sculptures seem related visually to the monumental The Gates of Hell inspired by Dante Alighieri’s Hell.
understand Max Klinger’s huge sculpture of Beethoven. The idea that Klimt’s frieze was only a part of a Wagnerian “total work of art,” which combined painting, sculpture, and architecture with embedded suggestions about music, leads Koja to the conclusion that conceptually, the Beethoven Frieze “attempts a symbolic translation of Beethoven’s ninth symphony” (91-93). Visually, however, it may be read as another version of Dante’s Inferno: the floating slim bodies from the second gallery echo the souls of the lustful, while the Hostile Forces: Sickness, Madness, and Death may fit many episodes in Dante. Typhoeus and Lasciviousness, Lust, and Excess reconsiders, for example, Doré’s grotesque into its modernist equivalent: crude and explicitly erotic, decorative and static.

Although he did not receive full credit for his influence, Doré contributed not only iconographical motifs such as floating figures, contorted postures, and swirls of drapery to art nouveau and secessionism, but also a modern attitude towards book illustration and art. Open to experimentation with electrotype clichés, Doré allowed his images to circulate in thousands of editions in Europe and the United States. His designs were both literally and figuratively clichéd: Doré was the first major artist who both suffered from and enjoyed the effects of mass consumption, as Aida Audeh showed her article. Because Doré’s motifs circulated as common visual knowledge, very few artists paid tribute to him. Among the very few I can name are Edward Burne-Jones, August Rodin, and much later, Salvador Dali. By approaching illustration as a visual hermeneutic whose scope was to put into image what the text meant more than what the text referred to explicitly, Doré changed the history of the book: William Morris, inspired by Doré’s Divina Commedia, was to publish at Kelmscott Press in 1890 Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales in elephant folio format with Edward Burne-Jones’ illustrations. Morris and Burne-Jones pushed Doré’s experiment even further as illustrations took center stage, transforming the text into a decorative element of the overall design. Morris, however, had fewer readers as he manufactured books as beautiful objects with as little mechanical contribution as possible, preventing massive multiplication of such art books. Doré’s predilection for painting huge canvases had also an impact on resizing easel paintings, and the late works of Leighton and Burne-Jones show this influence. Klimt’s Beethoven Frieze may be also interpreted as expansion of painting, this time, applied directly to the wall. The size of the frieze – 34 meters long (1,334 inches)– is a record for a “painting” that needed a whole building as support.

All of these visual innovations – expansion in the sheer size of a painting, freeing visual expression from Victorian prudery, fascination with the motifs of the deadly embrace or the swirl of fabric that later became purely decorative – originated in Dore's work on Dante. In this light, Dore's work, which has often been taken for granted, possibly because of its familiarity and accessibility, should be acknowledged for its substantial and sustained impact on modernist aesthetics and perceptions of sensuality.
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