Literary Visualization. Towards a Visual Annotation of Dante's 'Comedy'

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The project described below has a simple goal: producing a philological visual commentary to Dante's *Comedy* accessible through the web. The project, titled Literary Visualizations, is a joint venture involving two Princeton entities. The Princeton Dante Project, a digital textual archive conceived as a companion to Dante's poem, which was founded by Robert Hollander in the year 2000, and the Index of Medieval Art, an archive of iconographic types which has continuously been active at Princeton since 1917 and is currently making significant strides toward full digitization, under the direction of Pamela Patton.

Goals

From the perspective of Dante studies, our Literary Visualization project aims at making two coordinated interventions. Firstly, by offering users easy and line-by-line access to images of medieval works of art that contain the depiction of characters, places, and objects named or alluded to in Dante's poem, the project is designed to reconstruct the visual encyclopedia shared by many among Dante's early audiences. In so doing, it shifts the emphasis from the literal illustration of the *Comedy* as a text, i.e., the poem's visual interpretation by artists, to the role the visual arts have played in the conception of the poem by opening a window onto the mental imagery that Dante and his readers might have associated with his words.[1] Secondly, by providing a gamut of examples of iconographic analogs for the visual tokens evoked by the *Comedy*, our project proposes to concentrate not so much on individual works of art that Dante might have directly accessed but rather to

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[1] Visual reception of the *Comedy* is also documented in the Index. See, in particular, the digitization and iconographic analysis of the MSS M.289 and M.676 of the Pierpoint Morgan Library.

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focus on common and standard ways of constructing the visual representation of an object that were available in his culture. The project thus allows us to propose broader visual contexts as points of reference for Dante's text. Visualizing the poem entails not only referring readers to works of art that may have, in a traditional sense, 'inspired' Dante's poetry, but also identifying iconographic traditions that Dante could have assumed his readers would be familiar with.

Mechanics

"Literary Visualizations" will enable PDP users to navigate to a line of the *Comedy* and, by simply landing on a highlighted word, instantly access filtered visual results in the Index. Three elements are linked in the process of image retrieval: the 'tokens' in Dante's text (figures, places, objects), the iconographic types that correspond to the tokens (which are encoded in the Index entries as 'subjects') and images of art-objects that contain that type, accompanied by the relevant meta-data.

Production process

Each of these steps requires a human decision-making intervention, which is entrusted to a member of the working team. The team includes, together with Dr. Patton and Simone Marchesi, a graduate student in Comparative Literature, Max Matukhin, and one in Art History, Earnestine Qiu. Max is responsible for generating what we call 'tokens' from Dante's poem. In reading the *Comedy,* he systematically identifies the objects that may have received an iconographic treatment in medieval art. Once Max has made the decision to generate the token for that object in Dante's text, Earnestine determines what subject term in the Index database best matches the token and runs a preliminary search to assess the range of results it generates. Once the token-subject connection is validated, the decision to use the specific subject term as a search word into the Index database is recorded for the appropriate line and for the other lines in the poem in which the term appears (of course, only in the same acceptation as it is used in its original occurrence). Eventually, the lists of token-to-subject connections and subject-to-images that are thus produced will be used to link the databases.

     As we noted, the project is currently being developed, and we are moving through the matching phase. We look at a timeline

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of another year of work before we may go live in a Beta phase. At this point, however, we are confident both in the procedures we have adopted, based on a collaborative and interdisciplinary effort, and on the specific goals of the project.

State of the art and outcomes

By establishing a philologically-sound visual commentary to the poem, the project intends to correct two interrelated problems in the way readers imagine the *Comedy* today. First, analyses of the *Comedy*'s visual components which consider only the illustrations that the poem inspired, as valuable as these are, are also potentially subject to cultural bias. Although some illustrations of the text were made shortly after Dante completed it, many more were created in the seven centuries that followed, and archives that preserve and give access to visual commentaries to the poem overwhelmingly include artistic renderings that date from the resurgence of interest in Dante in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As such, they orient the poem's visualization along predetermined (and often deceptively familiar) lines. In doing so, they potentially contradict the visual expectations of early readers, those that Dante could have had in mind while writing the poem. Rather than recording how subsequent artists responded to Dante's words, our project aims at capturing Dante's own visual imaginary, along with that of his contemporary audience, and making it accessible to both specialists and the general public.[2]

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[2] For a rich documentation of Dante's reception in visual arts, see http://www.worldofdante.org/ created by Deborah Parker at UVA; https://digital-dante.columbia.edu/ by Teodolinda Barolini at Columbia University; and the repository http://www.danteeilcinema.com/dante-e-le-arti/ based at the University of Milan, curated by Giuliana Nuvoli. The UCLA Center for Early Global Studies and the UAB Institut d'Estudies Medievals have also been active in collecting and analyzing visual sources and reactions to the *Comedy,* as documented in their recent symposium (Summer 2016). Scholarly interventions that have made their way to print are not rare. They range from the historical overview offered by Jeanne-Pierre Barricelli, "Dante in the Visual Arts," *Dante Studies* 114 (1996): 79-93 to the most recent essay by Gervase Rosser, "Visual Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante,* eds. Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021),188-207, to the localized readings by Mirko Tavoni, in "Dante *imagining* His Journey Through the Afterlife," *Dante Studies* 133 (2015): 70-97; Tavoni, "The Vision of God (*Paradiso* XXXIII) and Its Iconography," in *Interpretation and Visual Poetics in Medieval and Early Modern Texts,* eds. Beatrice Arduini, Isabella Magni, and Jelena Todorović (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 94-121. In Italian, see also Lucia Battaglia Ricci, *Dante per immagini: Dalle miniature trecentesche ai giorni nostri* (Turin: Einaudi, 2018).

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Secondly, focusing on a wide range of iconographic ana-logues rather than limiting results to works of art from Dante's particular milieu provides researchers with more flexibility in seeking potential matches for literary terms and visual images. It also allows them to intercept potential points of reference in Dante's text (and thus potential visual allusions), even when individual relevant works of art from Dante's age have not survived or have survived only in areas eccentric or marginal to the known geography of Dante's life. By moving beyond a study of solely those artifacts to which Dante had plausible access and into an exploration of icon-ographic traditions to which his text potentially referred his readers, our project vindicates the validity of multiple and marginal strains of iconological influence on the imagination of his poem.[3]

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[3] Interpretive contributions focused on such cases of interference may be found in essays like John Freccero, "*Paradiso* X: The Dance of the Stars," *Dante Studies* 86 (1968): 85-111; Christie K. Fengler and William A. Stephany, "The Capuan Gate and Pier della Vigna," *Dante Studies* 99 (1981): 145-157; Robert Durling, "Farinata and the Body of Christ," *Stanford Italian Review* 2.1 (1981): 5-35; Nancy J. Vickers, "Seeing is Believing: Gregory, Trajan, and Dante's Art," *Dante Studies* 101 (1983): 68-85; Jeffrey T. Schnapp, *The Transfiguration of History at the Center of Dante's Paradise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986); Christopher Kleinhenz, "Dante and the Tradition of the Visual Arts in the Middle Ages," *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 65 (1990): 17-26; and, most recently, Louise Bordua, "Illumi-nating, painting, and sculpture," in *Dante in Context,* eds. Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 401-426. In Ital-ian, see the extended treatment of the *Comedy*'s visual 'sources' in Laura Pasquini, *"'Pigliare occhi, per aver la mente': Dante, la 'Commedia' e le arti figurative"* (Rome: Carocci, 2020), with ample bibliography.