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DANTE ALIVE

ESSAYS ON A CULTURAL ICON

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15 The Icon, the Exile

Dante and Contemporary Italian Street Art

Mac's Smith

In October 2020, the Italian street artist, M Fulcro, tagged the wall of a public parking lot in Ravenna's via Zagarelli alle Mura with a paste-up representing Dante Alighieri in handcuffs (Figure 15.1). Dante, recognizable in red robes and a laurel crown, is flanked by two police officers. Not long after, the artist would post the same image in the via di Casal dei Pazzi in northeast Rome, a few blocks from Rebibbia Prison. While some who shared pictures of the paste-ups assumed that Dante was being arrested for not wearing a face mask during Italy's COVID-19 lockdown,¹ the artist told *Roma Today* that the images "signify that, today, knowledge and large-scale change are limited and opposed if not outright repressed by the authorities" (Concilio).² He drew a parallel between his own work as an illicit artist and Dante's experience of exile in the fourteenth century. Simplifying the reasons for Dante's politically motivated exile, he suggests that Dante, like a street artist, was persecuted by the authorities for his art.

That a street artist would identify with a 700-year-old canonical poet like Dante is not as strange as it might seem. Dante is, in his own way, an urban artist. In the contemporary imagination, he is closely tied to Florence and to the cities where he spent his exile, including Rome, Verona, and Ravenna. The *Commedia* is suffused with references to cities, both specific and general. Dante depicts Hell as a fortified city (the city of Dis), and Catherine Keen and David Pike have each argued that the medieval city provides the model for all three zones of the afterlife. Pike has described the *Commedia* as an urban promenade:

The very structure of the poem around a series of encounters between a pair of motile individuals and one or several others who separate



Figure 15.1 Dante under Arrest, by M Fulcro in Ravenna. Photo by the artist.

themselves from larger crowds in order to converse closely reproduces the typical situation of urban citizens strolling through the streets of their city. (358)

We could also think of these "encounters" as esthetic ones: as the pilgrim and Virgil move through the cities of the afterlife, they see striking tableaux which they must interpret. Considered this way, Dante's poem is not so different from a modern street art tour. Dante even encounters *graffiti* in the literal sense on the Terrace of Pride, whose marble walls are "addorno / d'intagli" (*Purg.* 10.31–32) or adorned with carvings. The *Divina Commedia* thus provides a rich source of inspiration for modern street artists, in terms of how an artist can anchor his or her work in a specific place, and in terms of how urban space can be transformed into a space of startling, richly semiotic images that stop pedestrians in their tracks.

However, these are not the terms in which M Fulcro frames his identification with Dante. He sees Dante as a fellow outsider. This is surprising, because while Dante did experience exile, he has long since been

1 M Fulcro would make another series of images in June 2021 inspired by the *Divina Commedia* and COVID-19. The image of *Inferno* depicted Dante restrained by police; *Purgatorio* showed Dante getting vaccinated; and *Paradiso* illustrated Dante in the posture of a beggar, looking up at cherubim carrying products from Amazon, Nike, and Gucci.

2 All translations by the author unless otherwise specified.

recuperated as a national icon, and the *Divina Commedia* is as canonical as a poem can be. Indeed, Dante's iconic status is integral to M Fulcro's paste-up: the image relies on the surprise of seeing the national icon in handcuffs, and, as the artist says, Dante stands in for Italy's cultural heritage and its neglected "*saperi*" (Concilio). There is, therefore, an interesting hesitation in the artist's engagement with Dante, between seeing the poet as representative of the canon and wanting to reclaim him as an avatar for those excluded from it, and between Dante as symbol of the nation and Dante as persecuted exile. In this chapter, I will argue that this Janus-faced portrayal of the poet is a productive frame through which to think about how Italian street artists have engaged more broadly with Dante's image and work. I will ask why so many artists in this supposedly countercultural and ephemeral medium are drawn to a medieval poet of the divine and the eternal; how their images dialogue with other works of art depicting Dante or scenes from the *Commedia*; and, bearing in mind the tension between the icon and the exile, how they engage with long-raging debates in Italy over what Dante means and to what uses it is appropriate to put his image.

In questioning Dante's relationship to centers of power, M Fulcro's paste-up also indirectly raises questions about street art's relationship with institutions, and about the boundaries of the art form. The answer to these questions will be another theme of this chapter. "Street art" is difficult to define. It overlaps with or encompasses practices like graffiti, mural, land art, and advertisement. It can involve a variety of media, including paint, poster, sculpture, mosaic, and augmented reality. While it generally carries the connotation of art that is illicit, ephemeral, public, and urban, there are many exceptions. Some street art remains on the wall for decades or is even preserved in museums. There are abundant examples of street artists working outside of cities, in villages, or in uninhabited zones, but still referring to their interventions as street art.³ And indeed, while illegality is central to M Fulcro's comparison between himself and Dante, in the past two decades, institutional attitudes toward street art have dramatically changed.

Street art emerged out of the 1970's boom in spray-paint graffiti, whose epicenter was Manhattan. New York's gangs were among the contributors to that boom, and their participation helped shape the early perception of graffiti and street art as criminal acts, forms of vandalism, and symptoms of urban decay. This gave rise to the classic image of the street artist as a masked figure, anonymous for self-preservation, working by night and in a perpetual game of cat-and-mouse with police. While some artists continue to work that way (or at least to cultivate that image), the public and institutional perception of street art has changed. In Italy, the 2007 show *Street Art, Sweet Art* at the Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea in Milan signaled a new

level of institutional acceptance for street art, and in the past decade, it has become commonplace for cities to commission street artists and to create dedicated street art walls, from Milan's *100 Muri* to Civitacampomarano's *CVTà Street Fest*. (Pisa's decision to give Keith Haring its blessing to create a mural on the Sant'Antonio Abate Church in 1989 is a very early example of institutional embrace of street art, though the controversy it sparked, when compared to the lack of public opposition to such commissions today, is itself proof of changing attitudes.) Banksy's eye-catching sales figures have enticed collectors, and street art is now frequently marketed by municipalities as a sign of cultural vitality. Many street artists today complement whatever illicit work they do with gallery work—and even in the early days of street art, many artists, like Keith Haring, Invader, and Blek le Rat, had formal training from mainstream conservatories, belying the image of the street artist as a consummate outsider.

This background shows that if M Fulcro's attempt to claim Dante as an outsider artist is ripe for problematization, so, too, is his desire to represent street artists as criminalized outsiders. This chapter will therefore seek not only to untangle the politics of how Dante is represented in street art, but also what these street artists' engagement with Dante tells us about the politics of the art form more broadly. It will do so in two sections. In the first, I will look at artwork that depicts Dante himself, with a particular focus on *Dante Plus 700*, an exhibition in Ravenna bringing together street artists and pop artists around Dante's face. I will be interested in how street art engages with the broader tradition of Dante portraiture, and how it plays into political battles over his image. Dante's face, as Rachel Owen writes, "has become a cultural icon and a symbol of an ideal linguistic unity which anticipated national unification" (*Image of Dante* 83) and has, almost since the poet's death, been (re)claimed by cities and by Italy as a whole for ideological and economic reasons. I will ask how street art participates in that instrumentalization and also how it contests such motives, especially by using the imaginary of exile to oppose regionalism and nationalism. Due to the growing institutionalization of street art, some of the works discussed will be gallery paintings rather than illicit urban paste-ups, but they will all have been created by artists identifying as street artists. In the second section of the chapter, I will shift from pictures of Dante to remediations of the *Commedia*, and from the question of what Dante himself represents for street artists to that of how street art can engage with and borrow from the content, form, and hermeneutics of his poetry. The section will take as its case study a collaborative mural organized by Ale Senso in Isola Bergamasca in 2004. I will compare this mural with Dante's own encounters with graffiti in *Purgatorio* 10, and with his discussions of visual art and hermeneutics elsewhere in the *Commedia*, in order to begin theorizing a Dantean street art, a kind of art that would act on urban pedestrians the same way the scenes in the afterlife act on the pilgrim and Virgil, and the way in which the *Commedia* acts on its readers.

3 For example, the 2014 installation *Djerbahood* brought international street artists to the small village of Erriadh on the Tunisian island of Djerba.

Link to the book -> [https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/
edit/10.4324/9781003035145-20/icon-exile-macs-smith](https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003035145-20/icon-exile-macs-smith)