

A Comment on Doré's Illustrations of Dante (*Inferno*)

Connor McDonald, Independent Scholar

Dante Notes, 13 March 2019

During my childhood, my mother assigned classic literature as part of an informal education. The Bible, Shakespeare, and eventually Dante. She purchased an Easton Press copy for my benefit, and I remember being handed and holding the leather and accented gold with reverence, delicately turning the archival paper at the corner of the page. Along with Blake's illustrations, we would examine the woodblock engravings of Doré in a stark, 9 x 12 paperback by Dover Publications, each engraving placed neatly in context by lines translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.¹ I remember feeling troubled by Doré's illustrations of Dante, his cold and unyielding gaze upon the gluttons and the aristocrat Farinata and the bloody cries of Pier delle Vigne, always a sufferance that seemed unreflective of Dante's emotion and humility within the text.

Only later did I understand that Doré had captured for his audience the nuanced distinction between empathy and sympathy in the face of Dante, a distinction that further captured the artist's admiration for the poet. Sympathy, "the quality or state of being thus affected by the suffering or sorrow of another" from the Latin *sympathia* and Ancient Greek συμπαθής "to suffer with" (Oxford English Dictionary, n. 3.c.). Empathy, "the ability to understand and appreciate another person" after the German *Einfühlung* "feeling into" (Oxford English Dictionary, n. 2.b.). The attention that Doré's illustrations draw to the distinction between these definitions, through the often-unaffected face of Dante, reveals a conclusion within the text of *Inferno* itself: the sympathizer does not truly understand the individual that affects a state of suffering.

When confronted by the suffering that results from sin, the sympathizer can only suffer alongside. That is to say, the sympathizer can only experience Hell as suffering, as opposed to understanding Hell as a consequence. This inability to understand Hell as a consequence or divine retributivist order entails an inability to understand acts of sin and thus the nature of the sinner, because an understanding of the acts as sinful and the effect such acts have on the nature of the actor would entail an understanding of the sinner's placement within the hierarchical structure of the divine.² In short, an understanding of the sinner could not affect suffering, so the sympathizer does not understand the person with whom they sympathize; rather, the sympathizer merely exists as overcome by personal emotion.

By contrast, the empathizer understands the sinner and, as a result, can appreciate the sinner's condition. Rather than suffering with the sinner, the empathizer imports his own feeling into the situation of the sinner, effectively assuming the conduct of the sinner from a differing moral perspective that allows for detached critique of such behavior and comprehension of the entailing damnation; however, such empathy also allows for an appreciation of the sinner's predicament through adoption of the sinner's plight. One can imagine such a process as more painful than the sympathizer's, because rather than having a personal emotional state induced by the suffering of another, the empathizer assumes the position of the sufferer to ultimately understand and appreciate the full context of suffering.

One observes the effect of such an experience clearly in Doré's illustrations of Dante.³ For example, one observes Dante emerging into a state of empathy in Doré's twentieth plate, illustrating the gluttons. Admittedly, Dante remains withdrawn and physically shielded by Virgil in his location behind his guide; the stance pulls the protagonist into himself and suggests an analogous, inward-looking mental state by way of this posture. Such withdrawal corresponds to a

state of sympathy, wherein the focus inherently remains upon the self through the priority of subjective emotion, as contrasted with the empathizer's search for external understanding. In addition, Dante's hand within the image appears to pull away from interaction with the scene, his wrist bent upward in strain, and thumb pressed in tension against his index finger, the physical gesture impacting the illustration with a strong sense of perturbation. The tension in posture translates into a cursory perception of Dante as internally and emotionally affected; that is, Dante as sympathizer, who suffers with the gluttons, instead of Dante as empathizer, who understands the circumstance of the gluttons.



Ciacco, from Canto VI of *Inferno*. From *The Vision of Hell*, Dante Alighieri, trans. by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, M.A., and illustrated with the designs of Gustave Doré, (London: Cassell, 1892), plate 20.

And yet, this small hand gesture arguably exists as the most important depiction of empathy in Doré's twentieth plate, because the gesture exists as the first illustration in which Dante physically emerges from the protection or concealment of his robe after passage into Hell.⁴

Symbolically, the emergence of Dante's hand from his sleeve reflects an emergence of the poet from any initial self-preoccupation to interaction with his external surroundings, an emergence from a physical representation of the shroud of his prior confusion to an understanding of this realm of the afterlife. Dante's visage within the illustration further supports such an interpretation, as one finds no contortion in the protagonist's face that would evince terror or sentiment;



Ciacco, from Canto VI of *Inferno*. From *The Vision of Hell*, Dante Alighieri, trans. by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, M.A., and illustrated with the designs of Gustave Doré, (London: Cassell, 1892), plate 20.

to the contrary, Doré illustrates Dante with a solemn expression, his head tilted toward the extended arm of the fellow Florentine nicknamed Ciacco. In this gap between Ciacco's extended arm and Dante's physical emergence, Doré thus captures the issuance of empathy.

Corresponding to this interpretation, one observes in the text of *Inferno* any cursory suggestion of sympathy transition to a clear depiction of empathy during the interaction between Dante and Ciacco. Dante responds to the Florentine "Ciacco, il tuo affanno / mi pesa sì, ch'a lagrimar mi 'nvita," and yet the poet remains unaffected while shifting immediately to inquiry about the divided city of Florence (*Inf.* VI.58-63). In fact, Dante weeps only three times within *Inferno*. His first state of sorrow notably occurs before passage through the Gate of Hell, during his encounter with the she-wolf in the Dark Forest (*Inf.* I.92). The second state of weeping occurs when Dante first enters Hell and experiences the cacophony of cries and lamentations resounding in this new realm of black air (*Inf.* III.22-24). Arguably, Dante also expresses compassion to the

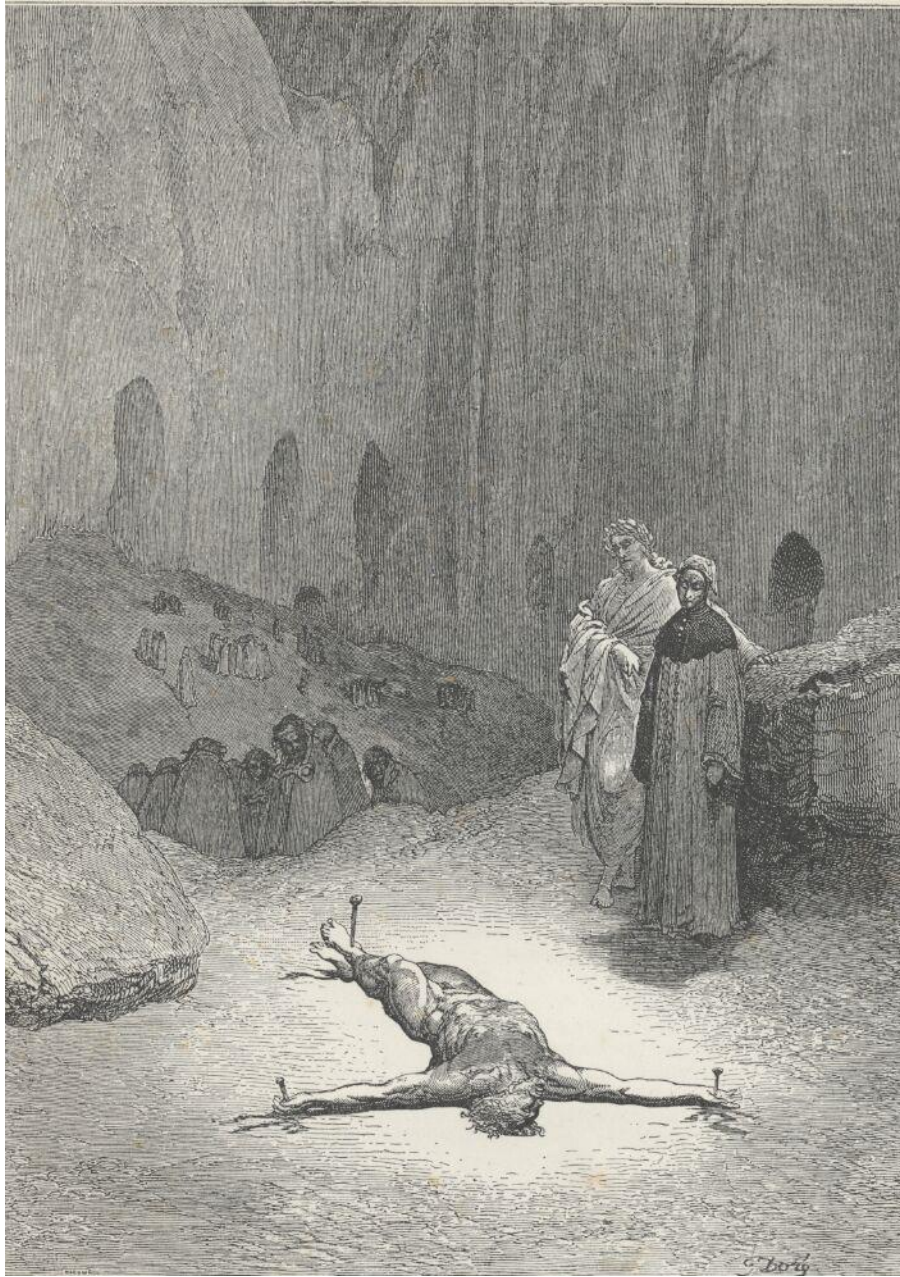
point of weeping for Francesca da Rimini, and even falls unconscious after being affected by sorrow, but the third state of weeping occurs explicitly in Canto XX, where Virgil reproaches Dante for his pity of the soothsayers walking with heads twisted to their backs (*Inf.* V.116-142; XX.7-25).

Here, Virgil provides the voice of empathy, stating “Qui vive la pietà quand’ è ben morta; / chi è più scellerato che colui / che al giudicio divin passion comporta?” (*Inf.* XX.28-30). Such a statement captures the nature of empathy described above. The situation of the damned does not affect the empathizer with sorrow or pity, because the empathizer understands the nature of the sinner and the sinner’s resulting place within divine hierarchy by putting himself into the place of the sinner. While the empathizer can appreciate the consequence of damnation, such understanding cannot elicit sorrow, because such a consequence fits within a divine order imposed upon the damned. Accordingly, Virgil’s criticism returns the travelers to the metaphysical framework provided before passage into Hell: “Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore” (*Inf.* III.4).

Awareness of the framework further serves to promote empathy by calling attention to the sinner’s role within this movement of justice, where one perpetually observes the sinners existing as the enactor of the divine judgment.⁵ More specifically, acknowledgment of the structured existence of the sinners in Hell, the penitent in Purgatory, and the blessed in Heaven suggests a capacity to move beyond sin and toward the divine, a capacity solidified by the progression of the text itself. This identified capacity to choose or exercise one’s will to move toward the divine entails the conclusion that the sinner either implicitly or explicitly refuses to advance forward. Whether out of a lack of comprehension or lack of desire, the capacity for progression in the afterlife results in the observation of the sinner as making an eternal choice to sin over a choice of the divine, and in this way the sin becomes reflective of the sinner’s essence.⁶ As a result, the

empathizer, importing this external moral perspective into his adoption of the sinner's position, understands the volition of the sinner as placing such an individual in the appropriate environment. At best, the empathizer can, as Dante does, listen to and accept the requests of the damned, such as Ciaccio, as an act in accordance with understanding the gravity of the sinner's predicament for the rest of eternity.⁷

Consistent with such understanding, one observes any initial depiction of Dante as sympathizer transition to a depiction of Dante as empathizer in his progression through Hell. Certainly, Doré represents such an image of Dante by way of his stoic and unaffected visage, but the events of Canto XX also appear to result in Doré emphasizing such a transition by placing Dante in front of Virgil in his fifty-second plate, which illustrates the crucified body of Caiaphas from Canto XXIII. Notably, this is the first illustration where Dante stands independently ahead of Virgil while observing the punishment of the damned, and from this illustration forward, Doré either places Dante alongside Virgil or prioritizes Dante's proximity to the viewer by placing the poet in front of Virgil during their descent, suggesting a sense of equality or even transcendence in Dante's capacity.⁸



Caiaphas, from Canto XXIII of *Inferno*. From *The Vision of Hell*, Dante Alighieri, trans. by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, M.A., and illustrated with the designs of Gustave Doré, (London: Cassell, 1892), plate 52.

The text of *Inferno* itself also justifies the identified progression of Dante's empathy.⁹ As cited above, Dante's states of sorrow induced by Hell occur predominantly in the initial stages of his journey, when Dante exists at his most lost and confused. By Canto XXXIII, one observes Dante in a complete state of empathy as he listens attentively to Count Ugolino's speech, wherein Count Ugolino states "e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?" (*Inf.* XXXIII.42).¹⁰ Dante does not respond, and only after Count Ugolino finishes his lament and returns to his doglike chewing of Archbishop Ruggieri's skull does Dante reproach Pisa for the killing of his children, innocent of their father's sin (*Inf.* XXXIII.79-90).¹¹

Where the sympathizer would exist as overcome by a personal emotional state when confronted by the suffering embodied in Count Ugolino's gnawing on the skull of Archbishop Ruggieri, the empathizer allows the experience of the individual to be heard and in this way comes to understand the individual's circumstance. As depicted in the text, Dante as empathizer provides an attentive and dispassionate audience to one of the most vicious punishments and longest speeches of *Inferno*.

Aptly, one observes in Doré's illustration an emotionless Dante standing above Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri. The poet also stands ahead of Virgil, suggesting that Virgil no longer leads Dante in this moment of their journey, that Dante does not need Virgil's guidance in the present moment, which evokes a sense of understanding. The differences in stances between Dante and Virgil also serve to symbolize Dante as empathizer where Virgil appears to have his arms on his hips underneath his layered attire, the contempt observable in the way his mouth pulls down, his gaze and stance suggesting scorn. Here, Doré depicts Virgil as neither sympathetic nor empathetic to Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri. Contrastingly, one observes Dante stand with solemn and open posture, not insulated from the scene in the manner of Virgil, who wraps

himself in his robe. Likewise, when one compares Dante's prior withdrawn posture in Doré's twentieth plate to his present stance, one observes a physically unreserved posture that suggests a corresponding open-mindedness or willingness to understand Count Ugolino's narrative. The comparison Doré invites through the contrast of Virgil's defensive or hostile posture and Dante's prior withdrawn posture with his present attentiveness thus imbues the poet with empathy.



Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri, from Canto XXXIII of *Inferno*. From *The Vision of Hell*, Dante Alighieri, trans. by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, M.A., and illustrated with the designs of Gustave Doré, (London: Cassell, 1892), plate 69.

As a final, pivotal symbol of Dante's empathy, Doré casts a supernatural light upon the protagonist's bowed head, where one observes the absence of his laurel wreath, an absence that Doré accents through Virgil's retainment of his wreath and the clear depiction of Dante's own wreath in surrounding illustrations. The absence of this wreath, symbolic of Dante's artistic role, suggests that the protagonist does not intend to render Ugolino's narrative as master poet, but to listen and understand. Put differently,



Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri, from Canto XXXIII of *Inferno*. From *The Vision of Hell*, Dante Alighieri, trans. by the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, M.A., and illustrated with the designs of Gustave Doré, (London: Cassell, 1892), plate 69.

the absence of Dante's wreath within this scene emphasizes that Dante has relinquished the role of speaker for that of audience. In the nuances of this illustrated moment, one thus observes a mindful Dante exceed his guide in empathy and understanding.

However, such a moment does not mark the finalization of empathy within the journey, and Virgil will resume his position as guide and corresponding placement at the forefront of Doré's illustrations in the next realm.¹² Metaphorically speaking, the travelers must still brave the perilous seas of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, which leave ample room for foundering (*Purg.* I.1-6, *Par.* 1-4). On these uncertain shores, an understanding of the gluttonous Ciaccio or traitorous Ugolino does not denote an understanding of the penitent or the blessed, and the immensity of the personal toll exacted by the development of empathy in Hell remains as uncertain as the shifting waters of the horizon. Amid the dawning light, the travelers and readers are thus left to reflect on the journey ahead (*Purg.* II.1-12).

While unsettled by the lack of sympathy in Doré's illustrations when I was a child, I now have a deep respect for the portrait that Doré illustrates. Perhaps this understanding merely reflects a necessary transition from the ignorance and sincerity of childhood, in which one remains open to being emotionally affected by the most dire of circumstances, even circumstances as harrowing as those of Hell, to the understanding and dispassion of maturity, in which emotional distance allows for self-preservation and understanding. In this sense, Doré's illustrations reflect how Dante himself chooses to begin the *Divine Comedy*: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita" (*Inf.* I.1). Ultimately, Doré captures a profound principle from *Inferno*: sympathy for sin does a disservice to all parties involved.

NOTES

1. Gustave Doré and Dante Alighieri, *The Doré Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy: 136 Plates*. Trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (New York: Dover Publications, 1976).

2. See Robert Hollander, *Dante: A Life in Works*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 104-109, for discussion of the impropriety of sympathy in the context of divine justice and the moral situation of the reader. Hollander suggests that the reader observes Dante's insistence on the justice of God from the very beginning of his description of Hell, concluding from identification of the premise that "[i]f God is just, it follows logically that there can be absolutely no question about the justness of His judgments" (p. 106). Based on this logical consequence, Hollander advises that the reader of *Inferno* is directed to identify instances of sympathy for the damned as reprehensible instances of misapprehension (pp. 106-107).

3. Along with the two instances cited in the first paragraph, one can observe depictions of Dante as empathizer in sixteen other illustrations by Doré: Plate twenty, where Dante gazes upon the gluttons; Plate twenty-one, where Dante gazes upon Plutus; Plate twenty-five, where Dante gazes upon Filippo Argenti; Plate thirty-nine, where Dante gazes upon Brunetto Latini, and here Doré captures perhaps a more significant empathy through Dante's posture of restraint, given the paternal traits Dante attributes to Brunetto Latini within the text; Plate forty-three, where Dante gazes down upon Alessio Interminei of Lucca amongst the flatterers; Plate forty-four, where Dante gazes down at Thais; Plate forty-five, where Dante appears especially unaffected when gazing upon the simonists writhing in holes of flame; Plate forty-seven, where Dante gazes sternly upon the troop of demons that Virgil confronts; Plate fifty-one, where Dante looks down from his vantage point at the proceeding of hooded hypocrites; Plate fifty-two, where Dante observes with tilted head the crucified body of Caiaphas, the high priest of Jerusalem, who called for the crucifixion of Christ; Plate fifty-five, where Dante looks down into the gorge of flames that envelop evil counsellors; Plate fifty-six, a particularly gruesome plate where Dante leans down solemnly to observe Mahomet presenting his entrails; Plate fifty-nine, where Dante gazes for the last time upon the mutilated schismatics; Plate sixty-one, where Dante gazes with subdued posture upon those punished for various forms of forgery; Plate sixty-seven, which depicts Dante in his descent to the final circle of Hell with tranquil demeanor and open posture; and Plate sixty-nine, where Dante stands with a similar tranquility and open posture before Count Ugolino, as he gnaws on the skull of Archbishop Ruggieri as if chewing on bread.

4. One could argue Doré's fifteenth and eighteenth plates constitute prior instances of Dante's physical emergence from the concealment of his robes. However, Doré's obfuscation of Dante in his fifteenth plate and dramatic prostration of Dante's body in the eighteenth plate seem ill-described as emergences, more aptly appearing as involuntary exposures resulting from sympathy, as noted later in relation to Francesca da Rimini. Moreover, any sense of emergence in the eighteenth plate is diminished by Doré's placement of Dante's body near the bottom of the page with his hands at the rightmost margin of the illustration. By comparison, Doré emphasizes the concept of emergence in his twentieth plate by centering Dante's left hand within the depiction of the protagonist's conscious movement from the concealment of his robes, this element of consciousness seeming vital for qualification as an act of emergence. Identifying Dante's physical and empathetic emergence at the point of his encounter with Ciaccio also seems more appropriate in the context of Hollander's reading of the text's cyclical movement from pity and fear to firmness in Dante's parade of sympathetic sinners, where Hollander suggests that "Ciaccio, for all his filth, is preferable, on at least one ground --his honesty-- to his apparently more attractive neighbor [Francesca]." Robert Hollander, "The Trouble with Ciaccio (*Inferno* 6)," *Electronic Bulletin of the Dante Society of America* (2013).

5. See Erich Auerbach, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 88, for the representation of damnation as "a continuation, intensification, and definitive fixation [of the individual's] situation on earth," which suggests a vision of Hell as a fulfillment of choice, as opposed to an externally enforced punishment.

6. See Philip Henry Wicksteed, *Dante and Aquinas*, (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1913), pp. 187-202, for a discussion of Dante's "emphatic insistence on the fact of the freedom of will" as it relates to the absence of moral growth in the sinner. From this premise of autonomy, Wicksteed articulates as a principle of Dante's Hell that "the punishment is simply the sin itself" and that the choice of sin essentially persists as the sinner's choice in Hell, wherein the sin finds a fitting environment (p. 200).

7. Regarding Ciaccio, Dante as the speaker in the poem clearly accepts the glutton's request to remind the world of his existence through the very act of voicing Ciaccio's existence to an audience, even though the speaker makes no such promise to Ciaccio himself before the man bows his head until the Last Judgment.

8. Doré's sixty-sixth plate, depicting the transportation of Dante and Virgil into the final circle of Hell, constitutes the only subsequent exception where Dante does not stand alongside Virgil or ahead of Virgil in his proximity to the viewer. Even in plate fifty-nine, where Doré places Dante physically behind Virgil in relation to the viewer, the protagonist still stands shoulder to shoulder with his guide.

9. In relation to the concept of progression, see Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's "Commedia"* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1969), pp. 301-307, for the aforementioned textual reading of Dante as moving through five cycles of pity and fear before reaching a state of moral resolve or firmness against sin.

10. See Robert Hollander, "*Inferno* XXXIII, 37-74: Ugolino's Importunity," *Speculum* 59 (1984): 549-555, for an affirming view that Dante does not fall into the trap of sympathy during his interaction with Count Ugolino, a father who incites Dante to weep when he himself did not weep or provide spiritual comfort to his starving children.

11. See Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 620-621, where Hollander notes that "Dante's apostrophe of Pisa, 'new Thebes,' blames the city, not for killing Ugolino, which it had a reason to do . . . but for killing the children." While Hollander attributes a sympathy to Dante in relation to Ugolino's children in this moment (p. 621), the presented attribution of empathy would suggest a resignation in Dante's words, as suggested by the shift from exclamation to a statement of recognition that an irrevocable wrong should not have occurred. The protagonist does not exist as personally affected by sorrow, nor does he suffer with Ugolino's children, whose suffering has ended; instead, the poet understands and states that Ugolino's children were wronged by the city. In terms of empathy, Dante thus displays a clear understanding of Ugolino by acknowledging his existence as a traitor, but adoption of the position of Ugolino also entails recognition that his innocent children should not have been placed with him in the Tower of Hunger. Accordingly, the gravity of Dante's words against Pisa reflect the gravity of his understanding.

12. Markedly, Doré's placement of Dante alongside or ahead of Virgil in his fifty-second plate persists to the end of *Inferno*, but the relationship between both travelers shifts once again upon reaching *Purgatorio*, as evidenced by Doré's eighty-first plate, which illustrates Virgil ahead of Dante and looking back toward his ward as they ascend the mountain of Purgatory.