

INTRODUCTION

LOOKING BACK TO LOOK FORWARD: DANTE CENTENARIES, THEN AND NOW

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Over the last two centuries, Dante has enjoyed an extraordinarily rich history of public commemoration in Italy and around the world.¹ Since the nineteenth century, when the celebration of literary and cultural figures played a vital role in the cultivating of new forms of national identity across Europe, centenaries have been especially important focal points for commemorative activities. In the case of Dante, some of these have become iconic and mythologized occasions. Most famously, the sixth centenary of Dante's birth in 1865 arrived shortly after the first stage of Italian unification and saw thousands of participants converge on Florence, recently made the new capital of the Kingdom of Italy, to honour a poet celebrated as the national symbol par excellence. On the eve of fascism and in the aftermath of the First World War, the 1921 centenary, marking six-hundred years since Dante's death, saw the poet used to buttress competing and hardening ideas of national identity in the context of significant political discord. Other centenaries have been less proprietary and nationalistic in tone. In 1965, for instance, there was a pointed "universalization" of Dante as a cultural symbol, as Italy reacted against the experience of fascism and the accommodation of the poet into its propaganda and iconography. The 2021 celebrations, meanwhile, combined a longstanding "national" promotion of the poet, especially through

¹ We have kept notes in this introduction to a minimum, since detailed bibliography on the centenaries discussed can be found in the six articles themselves. We shall, however, draw attention to four very recent volumes that are important points of reference in exploring this field and contain extensive bibliography. On the public commemoration of Dante in Italy, including several of the centenaries, see Fulvio Conti, *Il sommo italiano: Dante e l'identità della nazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2021), and, with reference to the history of Dante's human remains, Guy Raffa, *Dante's Bones: How a Poet Invented Italy* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2020). On the transnational reception of the poet, see the recent collections *Dante Beyond Borders: Contexts and Reception*, eds. Nick Havely, Jonathan Katz, and Richard Cooper (Oxford: Legenda, 2021); and *La mondializzazione di Dante: Atti del convegno internazionale (Nancy, 7-8 Ottobre 2021)*, eds. Antonella Braidà, Joseph Cadeddu, and Giuseppe Sangirardi (Ravenna: Longo, 2022)

the official channels of the state, with a spectacular diversification of memorial activities and approaches within the Italian peninsula and far beyond. It should be noted that other intriguing (but more neglected) Dantean anniversary and centennial events have been instituted and celebrated alongside those recording his birth and death. These range from the “Esposizione Beatrice,” marking the centenary of the death of Dante’s beloved in 1890, to the celebration of his imagined journey through the afterlife in Holy Week of 1300, as recounted in the *Commedia*. The sixth centenary of this imagined itinerary was marked in 1900 and has more recently been remembered in the annual celebration of the poet on “Dantedì.” Some of the more neglected Dantean centenaries have thus marked fictional and “intratextual” occasions, as well as more conventional biographical landmarks, and have had their own distinctive flavours and emphases.

While Dante centenaries have often been instrumentalized and officially monumentalized in the service of the modern nation-state, they have always simultaneously been transnational, cross-cultural, and socially diverse affairs. Far from being the preserve of cultural and intellectual elites, they have often witnessed an extraordinary level of popular participation and have been marked in a huge range of locations – away from the “canonical” sites of Florence and Ravenna – with distinctive local inflections. What is more, they have always inspired a significant diversity of cultural production beyond the written page, making them intriguing venues for innovative and cross-disciplinary research. The present collection of articles, based on a series of papers presented at a workshop at the University of Warwick in November 2022, intends to provide its readers with the most sustained critical treatment to date of Dante (and Beatrice) centenaries, from a range of methodological perspectives, and combining national and transnational emphases. The cluster of essays, entitled “Looking Back to Look forward,” recovers the long history of the Dante Centenary, carrying out a diachronic and comparative study of some of its manifold manifestations from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. It explores the historical, social, cultural, and political legacy of these collective civic rituals through the close analysis of a diverse body of sources, ranging from archival documents, press reports, and articles to political speeches and literary re-imaginings, monuments, and material culture.

When we held the workshop at Warwick that laid the foundations for this cluster of essays, the celebrations associated with the

2021 centenary had only recently concluded. It seemed an ideal moment to reflect upon the recent cycle of commemorations and celebrations, but in the context of a long and rich history of Dante centenaries from which contemporary events can easily be disassociated. 2021 had been an *anno dantesco* of unprecedented variety, defined especially by its truly global scale and cross-media character and by the development of new and often more inclusive avenues for the collective memorialisation of Dante.² While the pandemic often prevented the traditional delivery of established commemorative rituals in public squares and institutes, digital platforms provided opportunities for citizens to engage with hybrid conferences, streamed *lecturae*, concerts and dramatic adaptations. Digitally curated material like online exhibitions and editions, original podcasts, on-demand documentaries, and immersive gaming experiences in the multiverse complemented more conventional and in-person online events aimed at specialists and the wider public. Social media, meanwhile, reshaped the commemorative discourse around the new rhetorical modes cultivated by digital users and influencers. The online public emerged as a more demographically diverse community including younger groups eager to rethink Dante's iconicity in relation to contemporary questions of identity.

It would be easy to present 2021 as a wholly new form of commemoration. It is certainly true that digital and social media fostered innovation and a multiplication of "grassroots" activities, which departed from the monumentalizing tendencies of earlier Dante centenaries we have described. However, the official programme of centenary events organized in Italy and beyond, put in place by central government and by the network of Italian embassies, consular offices and cultural institutes, tended to show more continuity with the practices and rhetorical modes of the past.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sought to reinforce the idea of "Dante 700" as a global commemoration designed to foreground the poet's abiding influence on world literature and culture. Within Italy, as explored in the essays here by Tristan Kay and Heather Webb, Dante was often promoted in the political sphere as a figure associated with Italian cultural exceptionalism and one perhaps uniquely capable of fostering a singular idea of national unity and identity, often in ways that echoed the civic cult of the poet cultivated over the previous two centuries. In this vein, 2021 continued

² For a helpful overview of some of the commemorative events in 2021, see Matteo Maselli, "Seven Hundred Years After Dante's Death. The Imperishable Image of an Eternal Poet," *Bibliotheca Dantesca: Journal of Dante Studies*, 4 (2021): 199–211.

to partake in a familiar set of commemorative practices and drew on a longstanding rhetorical tradition which presented the medieval poet as somehow assimilable to the modern nation, its people, and its identity.

Given the extraordinary concentration of activity that has been associated with Dante centenaries, it is striking that, only one year prior to the 2021 festivities, an additional annual day of Dantean celebration was introduced in Italy, as though to suggest that the existing level of commemoration afforded to the poet was insufficient. “Dantedì” was instituted by the then Minister of Cultural Heritage Dario Franceschini as a “momento di unità nazionale.” This new celebration was to become “una ricorrenza sempre più rilevante e sentita dal popolo italiano, giustamente orgoglioso del suo massimo poeta.”³ Widely covered by the press, the introduction of “Dantedì” in the national calendar was met with great enthusiasm and acclamation, and brought about a wave of public activities, largely held online in its inaugural year to overcome the restrictions imposed by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Indeed, the celebration and recitation of Dante served to cultivate a sense of unity and solidarity at this acute moment of national crisis. A year later, “Dantedì” became one of the focal points for commemorative activities and political interventions in Italy alongside the anniversary of the poet’s death itself on 14 September. While the centenary itself took on truly global dimensions and was marked around the world, often emphasizing Dante as a universal figure capable of traversing political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, the function of “Dantedì” – as Franceschini’s words imply – has seemed especially concerned with promoting a unifying idea of the poet within the nation. Its annual occurrence seems to confer upon Dante still further significance and solemnity, taking him beyond the usual practices of commemoration of even the most esteemed cultural or historical figures, and placing his national day alongside significant public holidays, days of remembrance, and saints’ days in the civic calendar.

Many scholars, journalists, and politicians offered commentary on the choice of March 25, date of the imagined commencement of the pilgrim’s journey through the afterlife in the *Commedia*, as the annual date of this new Dantean festivity. The fact that

³ “Dario Franceschini: il senso del Dantedì: Dante simbolo dell'unità nazionale italiana,” *Rai Letteratura*, RAI.

<https://www.raicultura.it/letteratura/articoli/2021/03/Dario-Franceschini-il-senso-del-Dantedi-b03b9e19-a8ff-452f-aa0d-eebb05e20df6.html>

the adoption of an imagined literary event rather than biographical occurrence established a link with another centenary of “opportuno significato patriottico e civile” held in 1900 has passed unnoticed. The study of archival evidence, however, reveals that the “Sesto centenario della Visione Dantesca” and “Dantedì” not only had a commemorative focus on the *Divina Commedia* in common, but also shared the same pedagogical remit. Both celebrations, in fact, saw the substantial involvement of schools engaged in student-led projects, national competitions, and awards. There was, however, a difference in the age of the participants. Whereas “Dantedì” has involved students of all ages, reflecting the wider popularisation of the poet’s work across the school national curriculum, the “Sesto centenario” exclusively targeted “[le] scuole secondarie del Regno” where “la lettura e l’intepretazione della *Divina Commedia*, principal fondamento della cultura letteraria, innalzano e fortificano negli animi giovanili [...] l’amore della Patria.”⁴ What might appear as a minor similarity in fact points to the close continuity that binds the “liturgy” of contemporary Dante centenaries and commemorations with those of the past. The fact that these have largely passed unnoticed is symptomatic of the limited historical consciousness with which scholars and members of the public have tended to approach and participate in contemporary events, and which our cluster of essays here intends to redress. Viewed comparatively and not in isolation, the centenaries display important changes but also some intriguing continuities and echoes – in their rhetoric, rituals, and the ideas of Dante they have sought to promote.

The essays collected here, from scholars based in the UK and Italy and working across Italian, cultural, and historical studies, address this diversity of functions associated with the centenaries, in Italy and far beyond. The collection begins with the iconic 1865 celebrations of Dante in Florence and Ravenna. Tristan Kay shows the significance of this occasion in consecrating Dante’s status not only as a national poet, but as a near embodiment of the newly unified Italy. In the commemorative rhetoric of the new nation, poet and nation become fully assimilated. While it may be tempted to regard this heavily “national” tradition of Dante appropriation as part of history, Kay shows its echoes in the recent 2021 centenary,

⁴ In the public notice printed in the *Giornale Dantesco*, the Ministry of Education invited “i signori Provveditori agli studi, i Presidi e i Direttori degli istituti d’istruzione secondaria classica, tecnica e normale a far che Dante sia festeggiato nelle scuole d’Italia nel prossimo anno millenovecento, in cui si compie il sesto centenario del Priorato di Dante e della sua meravigliosa visione”. Notizie, *Giornale Dantesco*, VII (1899): 574–75.

where influential political figures used similar rhetorical strategies to remember the “*sommo poeta*.” Particular attention is paid to the celebration of Dante on the part of Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia party, which presented Dante as “father of Italian identity” and invoked him in the name of linguistic prescriptivism. As Kay’s essay goes on to argue, however, such an intensely nation-bound image of Dante, an idea of the poet which continues to command great legitimacy, can diminish our understanding of the transcultural and multilingual realities of pre-national medieval cultures.

Conventionally overshadowed by the momentous 1865 *Festa* is the *Esposizione Beatrice*, a celebration of the sixth centenary of the death of Beatrice Portinari held in Florence in May and June 1890. Federica Coluzzi’s essay offers a comparative study of these two occasions to document the nature and extent of women’s cultural labour. Having been marginalised observers of the 1865 centenary, the *Esposizione Beatrice* saw nineteenth-century female journalists and educators, poets and self-made *dantiste* come to the fore as organizers and creative participants. As such, Coluzzi’s essay innovatively connects gender history to the broader dynamics of nation-building and literary commemoration at play in the nineteenth-century reception of Dante and seeks to redress an ingrained historiographical imbalance.

Anna Pegoretti’s essay focuses on the famous Dante monument in the Alpine city of Trento. The statue, which was unveiled in 1896 when the city remained under Austro-Hungarian rule, became an important focal point in the 1921 centenary celebrations, by which time Trento had been “returned” to Italy following the Italian victory in the First World War. The fervent national rhetoric surrounding Dante, associated with the Risorgimento and the new nation, hardened in the early years of the twentieth century, and Dante (and the Trento statue specifically) became entwined with the irredentist movement and the nationalistic propaganda that accompanied Italy’s participation in the War. However, Pegoretti draws attention to the ways in which the cultural and political complexities surrounding the statue’s commissioning and inauguration in the late nineteenth century were quickly elided by its propagandistic function.

While the first half of the twentieth century saw an intensification in the national appropriation of Dante, culminating in the crude instrumentalization of the poet under the Fascist regime, the post-war period saw Dante absorbed into the attempts to “denationalize” the new Italian Republic. As Fulvio Conti’s essay here

shows, Dante in this period became celebrated on account of universality rather than as the consummately national figure of the previous decades. Conti focuses on the 1965 celebration of Dante's seventh centenary, which saw a striking range of commemorative events and initiatives, in Italy and around the world. While previous centenaries had often served to reify Dante as a prophet and symbol of the Italian nation-state, this centenary saw Dante celebrated as a universal symbol of creativity and promoted as a pop icon, reaching global audiences through new forms of mass media.

While the essays to this point focus on the place of Dante in some key phases of Italian nation-building, the remaining two contributions consider some fascinating examples of transnational memorialization. Daragh O'Connell traces the rich commemorative history of Dante in Ireland, through the centenaries of 1921, 1965, 2015, and 2021. O'Connell shows how, over the course of a century, Dante has been used to articulate competing forms of Irish identity, and to accentuate differences between Ireland and Britain. The article also gives a rich account of the dynamic and creative range of celebrations and creative responses that marked the 2015 and 2021 centenaries, and that saw Dante accommodated into a more pluralistic vision of Irish identity.

In the final essay, Heather Webb contrasts the "official" celebration of Dante on the part of the Italian state (which, as also explored in Tristan Kay's essay, continued to present Dante as a vector of Italian exceptionalism) with some compelling creative responses to the poet beyond the peninsula, encompassing ballet, painting, poetry, and sculpture, in Senegal, the UK, and the USA. The essay encapsulates the tension between proprietary and emancipatory responses to Dante that characterized the 2021 celebrations.

While some of the activities associated with Dante centenaries, especially within Italy, have often sought to emphasize the poet's timelessness and monumentality, taken collectively they present us with a more unstable and contested figure, unable to be contained by a single mode of interpretation and commemoration and continually open to renegotiation, reimagination, and reappropriation. On the one hand, they invite remembrance and draw attention to aspects of Dante's work which their participants seek to honour and preserve. On the other, they can often be seen as engaged in producing new Dantes (often eliding the poet's complexities and inconsistencies) that fit specific cultural and political agendas. In this sense, centenaries can be considered generative as much

as commemorative and often face the future as much the past. The six essays collected here, in their methodological variety and their different areas of focus and emphasis, reflect the rich diversity of Dante celebrations, but together emphasize the value of comparative approaches and offer a platform for further research into this area. While the forum lays the groundwork by broadly focusing on the “centre” of the phenomenon – predominantly concentrating on major agents, spaces, and contexts –, much remains to be said about its “periphery,” including questions of regional diversity within Italy and non-Eurocentric perspectives; participation across class, gender, and social lines; the preservation of cultural heritage; and capitalist consumerism. Far from being the exclusive domain of *dantisti*, moreover, Dante centenaries offer rich opportunities for cross-disciplinary work for scholars working on cultural and memory studies; gender and political history; and the history of media across print, screen, and digital platforms. We hope our collection speaks to scholars working across these disciplines and serves as a stimulus for new work and new voices in this rich seam of Dante’s reception history.