

DANTE ON THE BORDER (TRENTO, 1890-1921)

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The article focuses on the Dante monument in Trento, which was unveiled on the October 11th, 1896, and played a central role in the Dante centenary of 1921. In the city of Trento the celebrations became strikingly intertwined with the enduring celebrations of the Italian victory in the First World War and the acquisition of the so-called “unredeemed” territories. Conceived in the peculiar historical context of an Italian-speaking territory under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Trento monument reveals the enduring power of Dante as a symbol of the Risorgimento. However, the article aims to challenge the long-lasting interpretation of it as an overtly irredentist artwork advocating for annexation to Italy. This reading became standard after the First World War, overshadowing the complex negotiations of national cultures within the multinational perspective of the Empire. Rather, it retraces the complex development of the monument’s propagandist role, starting from the ode dedicated to its inauguration by Giosuè Carducci and extending to the Great War and the 1921 celebrations. Throughout this period, the artwork became increasingly instrumental in the irredentist and warmongering rhetoric.

Keywords: Dante monuments, Trento, Risorgimento, irredentism, Giosuè Carducci

1. Dante, the Irredentist

On October 11, 1921, King Vittorio Emanuele III and Queen Elena paid their first official visit to the city of Trento, which, along with Trieste, had been conquered by Italy in the First World War. Indeed, from the Italian point of view Trento and Trieste were considered “redeemed”: with their return to their natural homeland, the destiny of the nation and the long process of the Risorgimento had been fulfilled. Although Vittorio Emanuele had already visited Trento several times since the final days of the war, the chosen date for the first official ceremony holds special significance, coinciding both with the sixth centenary of Dante’s death and with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the inauguration of the city monument dedicated to him.¹ The official speech was delivered by Luisa

¹ I have extensively examined the story of the monument’s construction and its significance in my recent book *Dante a Trento! Usi e abusi di una retorica nazionale*

Anzoletti, a Catholic poet and intellectual from the city who had celebrated the project of the monument since its early stages. In front of the royals, Anzoletti proclaimed its renewed and “true” inauguration, symbolizing the fulfilment of a Messianic time of achieved unity.²

The extent to which the Dantean celebrations of 1921 intertwined with the post-war rhetoric of a nation that perceived itself to have achieved most of its goals and solidified its identity is widely acknowledged.³ Less well-known is the fact that in “redeemed” Trento the patriotic myth of Dante as the “Father” of Italy unleashed its fullest potential. The King—who in September 1921 had deserted the celebrations at the poet’s tomb in Ravenna, in light of the prevailing republican tendencies of in the region—celebrated Trento’s “redemption” and the culmination of the unification process in front of *its* Dante.

The Dante monument, unveiled on October 11th, 1896, when Trento was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, has consistently been regarded as an openly irredentist artwork, conveying opposition to the existing government and the desire for Trentino to be annexed to Italy (fig. 1). Indeed, in the two decades following its inauguration and especially during the Great War, the monument was increasingly utilized for propagandistic purposes, cementing its role as a symbol of anti-Austrian sentiment.⁴ In line with the escalating centrifugal tensions within the Empire and the rise of nationalist movements across Europe, Risorgimento

(1890-1921) (Rome: Castelvechi, 2022). In this paper, I revisit my research with some additional bibliographic and factual elements. Historical pictures of the monument and related to its story are available in the section ‘[I primi decenni: uno sguardo ideologico](#)’ of the virtual exhibition ‘[Obiettivo su Dante](#),’ curated by the Archivio fotografico storico provinciale – Soprintendenza per i beni culturali – Provincia autonoma di Trento; a few other pictures will be provided within the article. Very close to my own reading of the monument is Fabrizio Rasera, “‘Al poeta della giustizia.’ Note per una storia politica del monumento a Dante di Trento,” in Mario Allegri, ed., *Studi e percorsi danteschi: 1321-2021*, (Rovereto: Scripta edizioni, 2021), 291-315.

² Luisa Anzoletti, *Al monumento a Dante in presenza delle LL. MM. il Re e la Regina d’Italia celebrando la città di Trento l’XI ottobre MCMXXI: Parole di Luisa Anzoletti, a cura del Municipio di Trento* (Trento: Stab. di Arti Grafiche Scotoni & Vitti, 1921).

³ See Carlo Dionisotti, “Varia fortuna di Dante,” in *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 255-303 (esp. 289-95), and, most recently, Fulvio Conti, *Il Sommo italiano. Dante e l’identità della nazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2021), 119-46.

⁴ The label “terre irredente” to designate non-Italian territories with substantial Italian-speaking populations was popularized by the founder of the association “Italia irredenta” Matteo Renato Imbriani in 1877.

patriotism gradually embraced more aggressive tones, ultimately emphasizing the issue of the “unredeemed” lands through war-mongering rhetoric. In this context, the Dante monument emerged as a banner representing Italian claims on the Trentino region and stood as a sentinel guarding against enemy assault. Italy’s first modern battleship—launched in 1910 and emphatically named after Dante—featured a reproduction of it.⁵ The year after, the colossal movie *Inferno* was released, culminating in a framing of the Trento monument with a caption reading “Onorate l’altissimo poeta” (*Inf.* 4.80). The image evoked such fervent patriotic enthusiasm among the audience that it was deemed necessary to censor it in order to avoid provoking a diplomatic incident with Austria.⁶



Figure 1. By Nicola Eccher (2012). Trento, Fototeca di catalogazione - Soprintendenza per i beni culturali - Provincia autonoma di Trento.

⁵ See Guy P. Raffa, “Battleship Dante Alighieri (1908–1928),” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 138 (2021): 49–69. By the same scholar see also *Dante’s Bones: How a Poet Invented Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

⁶ Conti, *Il Sommo italiano*, 110–11.

At that time, the irredentist movement had already strongly associated Dante with its claims,⁷ relying on the assumption that the poet himself had traced the boundaries of the nation within his works. A series of quotations became topical and were staunchly defended by philologists, who put their erudition at the service of the cause. As regards Trentino, and more specifically the Italian northern border, the most contentious lines were “l’Alpe che serra Lamagna / sovra Tiralli” (*Inf.* 20.62–63), which were reportedly submitted even to President Wilson during the Paris Peace Conference.⁸ Between 1907 and 1909 Guido Mazzoni, a distinguished scholar and a member of Giosuè Carducci’s entourage, known for his involvement as a co-founder of both the ‘Società Dante Alighieri’ and the ‘Società Dantesca Italiana,’ engaged in a passionate debate with Tyrolean scholars regarding their interpretation.⁹ Leaning on the entire spectrum of stereotypes linked to the Alps as a providential barrier safeguarding the ‘bella Italia’ against perceived “barbarians,”¹⁰ Mazzoni argued for the most radical among the available options at that time and contended that Dante had unequivocally delineated the border between Italy and the German-speaking world along the Danube–Adriatic watershed. Tellingly enough, his articles were published in the journal founded by Ettore Tolomei, who, years later, would infamously inspire the fascist policies of Italianization in South Tyrol.¹¹

In the early years of the twentieth century, the Dante monument in Trento featured as a symbol representing the entirety of Trentino in Italian tourist publications. Together with Bezzeca in the Ledro Valley and San Giusto in Trieste, it became a popular destination for Italian “patriotic tours” and sports competitions in

⁷ As seen in the elaborate “lay pilgrimage” to his tomb in September 1908: see Conti, *Il Sommo italiano*, 66–105. See also Raffa, “Battleship Dante Alighieri (1908–1928),” which effectively reconstructs how Dante was used to serve the irredentist and pro-war agenda. A prominent Dantean publication issued during the First World War was *Dante e la guerra*, edited by Maria del Vasto Celano as a special issue of *Nuovo Convito* in 1917, featuring up to 36 articles: see Enrico Fenzi, “Alcune note su Dante profeta della nazione, dal monumento di Trento alla Grande Guerra,” in Zygmunt G. Barański, Theodore J. Cachey Jr., and Anna Pegoretti, eds., “*Now feed yourself*: Anglo-American and Italian Scholarship on Dante,” (Oxford: Legenda, forthcoming).

⁸ Paolo Orano, *Avanguardie d’Italia nel mondo* (Rome: Società Nazionale Dante Alighieri, 1938), 11. The tercet reads: “Suso in Italia bella giace un laco, / a piè de l’Alpe che serra Lamagna / sovra Tiralli, c’ha nome Benaco” (*Inf.* 20.61–63).

⁹ Guido Mazzoni, “L’Alpe che serra Lamagna / sovra Tiralli,” *Archivio per l’Alto Adige con Ampezzo e Livinallongo* II (1907): 5–8; and IV (1909): 90–93.

¹⁰ See *infra*, § 2.

¹¹ Gisela Framke, *Im Kampf um Südtirol: Ettore Tolomei (1865–1952) und das “Archivio per l’Alto Adige”* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1987).

the “unredeemed” territories.¹² During the war, it was a favorite subject for postcards, along with Cesare Battisti, one of the Italian martyrs of the Great War (fig. 2).

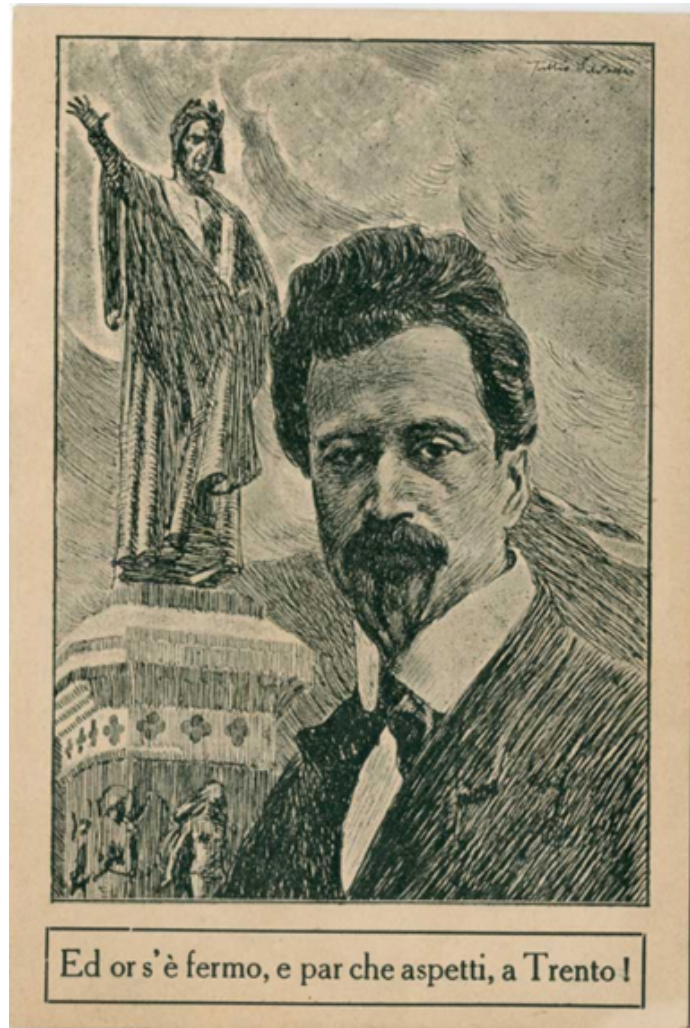


Figure 2. Tullio Silvestri, post-card (1915-1921). From [https://14-18.it/\(MCRBO_cart00840\)](https://14-18.it/(MCRBO_cart00840)).

Even the Austrians ultimately perceived the monument as the quintessential symbol of the enemy assault: the weapons captured during the victorious *Strafexpedition* in 1916 were

¹² Davide Bagnaresi, “Editoria turistica e irredentismo: La statua di Dante a Trento tra rappresentazioni e gite patriottiche (1896-1927),” *Storia e futuro. Rivista di Storia e Storiografia Contemporanea online* 23 (2010): 1-32 (https://t.ly/v_jd); Id., “I pellegrinaggi patriottici nell’Italia liberale: Linguaggi e luoghi,” *Storicamente* 7 (2011), art. 31 (<https://doi.org/10.1473/stor110>); Id., *Per un galateo politico del viaggiatore: editoria turistica in Trentino fra XIX e XX secolo* (Trento: Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, 2014); Elena Tonezzer, “Segnare il confine con una performance ciclistica. In bicicletta sulle strade dell’identità (Trentino 1908),” *Scienza & Politica* 36 (2007): 59-71 (<https://doi.org/10.6092/>).

prominently displayed around its base. Likewise, the general Guglielmo Pecori Giraldi, who commanded the Italian troops that entered Trento on November 3rd, 1918, had himself photographed in front of it (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Gen. Guglielmo Pecori Giraldi in front of the monument (November 4th, 1918). Trento, Fondazione Museo storico del Trentino, Fondo Generale, B. 7 /190 (G).

Following the troops was the Japanese poet and writer Harukichi Scimoi, an ardent admirer of Dante who would later be nicknamed ‘camerata samurai’ by Gabriele D’Annunzio. In his letters, Scimoi recounts his arrival in Trento on the night of November 3rd and 4th, his advancing through a sea of prisoners and make-shift camps, and the profound emotion he felt when finally standing before the monument:

Solenne era il momento.

Mezzanotte era già passata. Venne la pioggia sottile sottile. Nel cielo oscuro, il monumento sorgeva nero ed altero.
E, sul marmo lucido del suo piedistallo, s'inginocchiò e s'inclinò reverente, sotto la dolce pioggerella, un piccolo giovane che è venuto dall'Estremo Oriente [...]
guidato solo dall'amore delle divine parole del Poeta [...].
Oh, come ero felice, indicibilmente felice!¹³

In 1919 the monument, along with its original inscriptions, damaged by the Austrians, was restored and a ceremony was held. The main promoter of the monument, Guglielmo Ranzi, delivered an impassioned speech, describing it as an “Altare della Patria,” one which, since its very inception, had symbolized the yearning for freedom in Trentino and the collective determination of Italy to liberate itself from the Austrian yoke.¹⁴ Hence, the war was interpreted as the culminating point of an epic struggle for liberation from a tyrannical oppression. In the following years, such a view largely prevailed even in scholarship.¹⁵

2. Dante, the Alpine sentinel

Indeed, evidence of a distinct extremist interpretation of the Dante monument in Trento had surfaced almost immediately. A few days following the inauguration, a group of nationalist militants, including Cesare Battisti, sent a photograph of it to the Savoia royal family as a wedding gift for the marriage of Vittorio Emanuele and Elena, which occurred at the end of October 1896. The picture was presented in a lavish frame, featuring the coat of arms of the House of Savoia alongside those of the six Trentine cities. With diplomatic caution, the gift was declined, only to be returned at the end of the war.¹⁶

¹³ Harukichi Scimoi, *La guerra italiana vista da un giapponese, con introduzione di Giuseppe de Lorenzo, autografi di Gabriele d'Annunzio, epilogo di Gherardo Marone* (Naples: Libreria della Diana, 1919), 62.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Stefenelli, *Guglielmo Ranzi e il monumento a Dante a Trento* (Trento: A. Scotoni, 1932), 65–68.

¹⁵ With regard to the Dante monument in Trento, this interpretation is predominant in Augusto Sandonà, *L'irredentismo nelle lotte politiche e nelle contese diplomatiche italo-austriache, vol. II. (1878–1896)* (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli editore, 1938), and still present in Sergio Benvenuti and Guido Lorenzi, *Il monumento a Dante a Trento: Storia e significati* (Trento: Tipolitografia TEMI, 1992). On the Italian memory of the Great War see Quinto Antonelli, *Cento anni di Grande Guerra: Cerimonie, monumenti, memorie e contromemorie* (Rome: Donzelli, 2018).

¹⁶ “Un regalo di nozze che arriva a destinazione con venticinque anni di ritardo,” in Ottone Brentari, ed., *Il re a Trento: XI ottobre 1921*, (Trento: Scotoni & Vitti, 1921), 12.

What is more, an irredentist reading of the monument was implicitly conveyed by the ode dedicated to it by the renowned poet and professor Giosuè Carducci, who was considered the most prominent intellectual figure in unified Italy.¹⁷ The poem, written in the same meter as the *Commedia*, features as a title the date of Dante's death and is significantly dated September 20th, coinciding with the anniversary of the capture of Rome. Between 1890 and 1892, Carducci had already devoted three poems to this event (*Piemonte, La Bicocca di San Giacomo, Cadore*),¹⁸ in his view representing a pivotal moment in the fulfilment of the "fate" of the nation as the veritable heir to ancient Rome. The two dates establish a precise framework for the poem, intertwining Dante with the destiny of the fatherland and its glorious past.

In this ode, Carducci envisions that at the moment of Dante's passing, his soul traverses the sea to the mountain of Purgatory, where he requests to undertake his penance. A remote God entrusts him with the sacred duty of safeguarding Italy until the "perfection of time" arrives ("Italia Dio in tua balia consegna / sì che tu vegli spirito su lei / mentre perfezion di tempi vegna"). Over five hundred years later, Dante appears to have halted in Trento, *awaiting* like an avant-guard Alpine sentinel ("Ed or s'è fermo, e

¹⁷ "Sùbito scosso de le membra sue / lo spirito volò: sovr'esso il mare, / oltre la terra, al sacro monte fue. // A traverso il baglior crepuscolare / vide, o gli parve riveder, la porta / di san Pietro nel monte vaneggiare. // 'Aprite – disse –. Coscienza porta / il mio volere, e tra i superbi io vegno, / ben che la stanza mia qui sarà corta. // E passerò nel benedetto regno / a riveder le note forme sante, / ché Dio e il canto mio me ne fa degno.' Voce da l'alto gli rispose 'Dante, / ciò che vedesti fu e non è: vanio / con la tua vision, mondo raggiante / ne gl'inni umani de la vostra Clio: / dal profondo universo unico regna / e solitario sopra i fati Dio. // Italia Dio in tua balia consegna / sì che tu vegli spirito su lei / mentre perfezion di tempi vegna. // Va', batti, caccia tutti falsi dèi, / fin ch'egli seco ti richiami in alto / a ciò che novo paradiso crei.' // Così di tempi e genti in vario assalto / Dante si spazia da ben cinquecento / anni de l'Alpi sul tremendo spalto. // Ed or s'è fermo, e par ch'aspetti, a Trento." The ode was read on September 20th at the Zanichelli bookshop in Bologna and published at the beginning of the celebratory book prepared by the promoters of the monument *Il Trentino a Dante Alighieri: Ricordo dell'inaugurazione del Monumento Nazionale a Trento* (Trento: Giovanni Zippel editore, 1896). On the paramount role of Carducci in the Italian process of nation-building see Laura Fournier-Finocchiaro, *Giosue Carducci et la construction de la nation italienne* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 2006).

¹⁸ Along with the one devoted to the Trento monument, all these poems were included in Carducci's last and most patriotic collection, *Rime e Ritmi* (1897). See Francesco Bausi, "'Ella è volata fuori della veduta mia': Per una rilettura di *Rime e ritmi*," in Emilio Pasquini and Vittorio Roda, eds., *Carducci nel suo e nel nostro tempo*. Atti del Convegno tenuto a Bologna nel 2007, (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2009), 225-54.

par ch'aspetti, a Trento") on the terrible bastion of the Alps ("de l'Alpi sul tremendo spalto").

The notion that the Alps served as a natural border for the Italian peninsula is an ancient and intuitive concept. The idea of Italy as the "bel paese" (the label itself originating from Dante), encompassed by the Alps and the seas, has been deeply ingrained in a longstanding tradition that stretches from the Latin antiquity to Carducci's time.¹⁹ Notably, in Petrarch's *Italia mia* the Alps are depicted as a protective shield against the "German rage," emphasizing their role as a barrier ("Ben provide Natura al nostro stato, / quando de l'Alpi schermo / pose fra noi et la tedesca rabbia").²⁰ Conversely, in his *Dei sepolcri*, Foscolo laments their being inadequately defended ("le mal vietate Alpi").²¹ At the end of the nineteenth century, this long-standing literary theme intertwined with the emergence of modern alpinism and a new perspective on mountains. This transformation turned the Alps into what Leslie Stephen—the founder of the British Alpine Club and father of Virginia Woolf—famously referred to as the "playground of Europe."²² During the same period, specialized alpine military units were established in France, Italy, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, emphasizing the need for defence.

Carducci's portrayal of Dante standing as a guardian on the Alps appears to be shaped by an intimate knowledge of the Trento monument, of its position in the Alpine surroundings of Trento and orientation facing north (fig. 4). He may have engaged in discussions with its creator, the esteemed Florentine sculpture Cesare Zocchi.²³ The ode is far from straightforward in its meaning and plays carefully with allusions. It deftly employs a hermetic language, drawing heavily from Dante's eschatology and prophetism, while subtly incorporating echoes of Masonic symbolism. The result is a layered composition that invites multiple interpretations. What is Dante waiting for? Despite debates,²⁴ and considering the historical

¹⁹ See Petrarch, *Rvf* 146.13-14: "il bel paese / ch'Appennin parte, e 'l mar circonda et l'Alpe." Alessandro Manzoni, *Marzo 1821*, 29-30: "Una gente che libera tutta, / o fia serva tra l'Alpe ed il mare."

²⁰ *Rvf* 128, 33-35.

²¹ *Dei sepolcri*, 182.

²² Leslie Stephen, *The Playground of Europe* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1871).

²³ Umberto Valente, "Commentando il Carducci," *Il Fanfulla della Domenica*, January 16, 1916, 1-2, reports that Carducci wrote the ode at the end of a dinner with Zocchi in Florence.

²⁴ An exclusively Masonic reading of the ode is conveyed in Giosuè Carducci, *Rime e Ritmi*, ed. Marco Veglia (Rome: Carocci, 2011); this was the same interpretation

context and Carducci's own involvement in irredentism, such a Dante safeguarding Italy surely awaits the redemption of Italian-speaking territories and the fulfilment of the Risorgimento.



Figure 4. Enrico Unterveger (1936). Trento, Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, Iconografia Battisti B208/1.

In 1915 the declaration of war would overtly proclaim this very purpose, aligning with the underlying sentiment in the ode.²⁵

given by the Trentino Catholics at that time (see Rasera, “Al poeta della giustizia,” 312–13). A mild interpretation of the political meaning of the ode is offered in William Spaggiari, “‘Il vicin mio grande’: Carducci e Dante,” in *Dante nel Sette-Ottocento: Note e ricerche* (Milan: LED – Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2022), 97–125 (esp. 122–23).

²⁵ “Soldati di terra e di mare! L’ora solenne delle rivendicazioni nazionali è suonata. [...] A voi la gloria di piantare il tricolore sui termini sacri che la natura pose ai confini della Patria nostra. A voi la gloria di compiere, finalmente, l’opera con tanto eroismo iniziata dai nostri padri.” The whole text is available [here](#). In the same year, the ode for the Trento monument was included in an anthology of irredentist and patriotic writings by the late Carducci edited by the Società Dante Alighieri. The booklet was entitled after a line from *Cadore*, explicitly referencing the Austrian Empire: *Contro*

In the aftermath of the war, the “end of the wait” would have been widely announced: in her speech in 1921, Luisa Anzoletti turns the ode to the past-tense, talking about a Dante that “aspettò a Trento;” the memorial stone devoted to Carducci on Mount Piana, on the old border between Italy and the Empire, expresses gratitude to the poet of the prophesized victory in his celebration of the Trento monument.²⁶

Deeply concerned about the perils of national moral weakness, Carducci found in irredentism a political space where the ideals of the Risorgimento remained vibrant.²⁷ He actively campaigned for the release of Guglielmo Oberdan and championed him as a national martyr after his death. Among his many writings, the *odi barbare* *Saluto italico* and *Miramar* exemplify his profound engagement with the Italian community in Trieste. The poem for the Dante in Trento was featured in Carducci’s last and more patriotic collection of poems, *Rime e Ritmi*, which skilfully develops a national discourse on two fronts: firstly, it evokes a glorious past through the remembrance of major figures, such as Goldoni, Boiardo, and Niccolò Pisano; secondly, it strategically utilizes toponymies to chart a revealing cartography of the nation, within which Trento emerges as a crucial point in the Alps, bridging the regions of Piemonte and Cadore.²⁸

Carducci had already expressed a similar idea in the *ode barbara Alla Vittoria: Tra le rovine del tempio di Vespasiano in Brescia* (1877). In this poem, the statue of the goddess Victory, that had been unearthed in Brescia half a century earlier (1826), is portrayed

l’eterno barbaro. A copy of this anthology was found among the personal belongings of the irredentist leader Cesare Battisti when he was captured by the Austrians.

²⁶ Anzoletti, *Al monumento a Dante*, 8; Pegoretti, *Dante a Trento!*, 11-13 (see 237-38 for a further example).

²⁷ On Carducci’s irredentism see Alberto Brambilla, “Carducci, carduccianesimo e irredentismo a Trieste: note per un percorso bibliografico,” *Quaderni giuliani di storia*, 15, 1. *La monarchia austro-ungarica tra irredentismi e nazionalismi: L’azione della Lega Nazionale ai confini italici* (1994), 101-21; Fournier-Finocchiaro, *Giosuè Carducci et la construction de la nation italienne*, 47 and 80-83; Umberto Carpi, *Carducci: Politica e poesia* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2010), 241-54; Chiara Tognarelli, “Martiri dell’idea: Carducci e l’irredentismo triestino,” in Lorenzo Battistini et al, eds., *La letteratura italiana e le arti*. Atti del XX Congresso dell’ADI-Associazione degli Italianisti (Napoli, 7-10 settembre 2016), (Pisa: Adi editore, 2018) <https://bit.ly/3Big6ye>.

²⁸ See Anna Pegoretti, “Le Alpi in *Rime e Ritmi*,” in Giuseppe Crimi, Luca Marcozzi, Anna Pegoretti, eds., *Santi, giullari, romanzieri, poeti. Studi per Franco Suitner*, (Ravenna: Longo, 2022), 231-36. On the intertwining of geography and literature in Carducci’s oeuvre there is a sizeable bibliography: see Spaggiari, ““Il vicin mio grande,”” 117-18.

standing on the Alpine border, serving as a symbolic deterrent to foreign forces:

Vorrei vederti su l'Alpi, splendida
fra le tempeste, bandir ne i secoli:
«O popoli, Italia qui giunse
vendicando il suo nome e il diritto».
(*Alla Vittoria*, 17–20)

During the war, these same lines were significantly printed on a postcard of the Trento monument.

3. *The Limbo of politics, the war of cultures*

If in the early twenty years of the twentieth century the irredentist significance of the monument could become fully apparent, during its construction things were not as straightforward. According to the promoters, the monument intended to celebrate Dante as the “Genio tutelare” of the Italian language and civilization in Trentino.²⁹ It was conceived as an explicitly “national” monument,³⁰ that aimed to assert the Italian character of the region, evident through historical, linguistic and even anthropological observations.

One could rightfully wonder how such a celebration could actually take place. In this regard, it is important to point out that both its promoters and the Austrian political authorities were navigating their positions within a *multinational* juridical and rhetorical culture, one which would eventually be overshadowed by the escalating national tensions in Europe. Indeed, theory was not always easy to put into practice, and positions and claims were in constant negotiation. Within the imperial juridical and political framework, such an overt national proclamation was perfectly legal. A key part of the constitution, stemming from the *Ausgleich* (the compromise between Austria and Hungary signed in 1867) stated that “all the nations of the state have equal rights and every single nation has the inviolable right to preserve and cultivate its own nationality and language.” Clearly, the idea of nation underlying this rule is independent of belonging to an ethnic state: nations exist regardless of their institutional framework and have their most distinctive feature

²⁹ *Programma di concorso* (1891): Trento, Biblioteca della Fondazione Museo Storico del Trentino, Fondo Ranzi, B. 5, fasc. 3, doc. 45.

³⁰ See the title of the celebratory book quoted in footnote 17.

in their language. The Empire recognizes these nations and their right to preserve themselves.

The promoters of the monument were mainly members of the local Liberal party. Leading the initiative was Guglielmo Ranzi, a representative figure of the late nineteenth-century liberal and nationalist bourgeoisie of the city of Trento. Since 1895, Ranzi served as the local trustee of the Società Dante Alighieri, which at that time was directed by the prominent historian and former minister Pasquale Villari. About thirty years old and a law graduate, Ranzi was deeply immersed in the literary culture of the Risorgimento, most specifically in what Alberto Mario Banti called the “canone risorgimentale.”³¹ This literary canon encompassed Foscolo, Manzoni’s civil poetry, Vincenzo Gioberti, Giuseppe Giusti, the “local hero” of Trentino Giovanni Prati, and the world of melodrama. Ranzi drew inspiration and nourishment from these literary sources as he pursued his endeavors, and echoes can be readily detected in his writings and speeches. Needless to say, this canon culminated in Giosuè Carducci and promoted Dante as the “patron saint” of Italian national culture.

Such a canon developed during the Risorgimento to build a national cultural paradigm that, in post-unification Italy, no longer served to mobilize the population, but rather to build and strengthen the identity of the new state. As George Mosse would put it, it served to “nationalize the masses” (or, according to a famous adage, to “make the Italians”), being a prominent part of a widespread national pedagogy that unfolded in schools, the army, and also through the dedication of streets and landmarks.³² Monuments played a major role in this process, to the point that even Carducci lamented a “monument-mania.”³³ In Trento, however, this national rhetoric was seemingly “frozen” in a pre-unification stage. It not only served to reinforce the national identity of the people, but, more significantly, regained its original meaning,

³¹ Alberto M. Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell’Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999).

³² George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975). With regard to Italy, see at least Bruno Tobia, *Una patria per gli italiani. Spazi, itinerari, monumenti nell’Italia unita (1870–1900)*, (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991); Id., *Una cultura per la nuova Italia*, in Giovanni Sabbatucci and Vittorio Vidotto, eds., *Storia d’Italia, 2. Il nuovo Stato e la società civile 1861–1887*, (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1995), 427–529.

³³ Giosuè Carducci, “Monumentomania” (1887), in *Ceneri e faville. Serie terza*, Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Giosuè Carducci, XXVIII (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1943), 295.

becoming a catalyst for actual and urgent political action. This unique circumstance highlights a dynamic in which the historical context allowed for an immediate and renewed alignment between the national rhetoric and active political engagement.

Indeed, the situation differed greatly from that of the Risorgimento era. Whilst the oppressor remained the same, the option was not independence anymore, but rather annexation to Italy, that in the meantime had established itself as a nation-state. However, Italy had firmly aligned itself with Austria–Hungary through the signing of the Triple Alliance in 1882, a pact that bound it with the Empire and Germany until the outbreak of the First World War. Hence, any irredentist perspective could only appear to the eyes of the Trentino ruling class as a politically unrealistic horizon. In this context, the Italian national sentiment appeared to be trapped in a kind of “limbo,” caught between Austro–Hungarian constitutionalism and an eternal state of unfinished Risorgimento.

Local politicians opted to focus their efforts on advocating for administrative and political autonomy, especially from the regional government based in Innsbruck. However, their pursuit of this political agenda ultimately proved unsuccessful. Furthermore, during the 1880s and 1890s, pan–Germanist associations emerged with the objective of safeguarding and advancing German language and culture. These associations actively promoted German schools, that in Trentino sought to compete with Italian schools (which, by the way, lacked comprehensive support in terms of literature, history, and culture for language instruction). On the Italian side, similar national associations were established. Hence, the political deadlock was superseded by a cultural conflict, a situation that was not uncommon throughout the Empire. Schools became veritable national “trenches” in a war that aimed at safeguarding children from the perceived threat of “barbarization.”³⁴ This escalating competition reached its peak in 1889 with the unveiling of a statue in Bozen dedicated to the medieval poet Walther von der Vogelweide, symbolizing the defender of German language on its southern border. This event served as a catalyst for the subsequent initiative of the Dante monument in Trento, making it its most

³⁴ Claus Gatterer, *Erbfeindschaft Italien–Österreich* (Vienna: Europaverlag, 1972); Italian translation “*Italiani maledetti, maledetti austriaci.*” *L’inimicizia ereditaria* (Bolzano: Praxis 3, 2009), 125–41; Quinto Antonelli, *Storia della scuola trentina: Dall’umanesimo al fascismo* (Trento: Il Margine, 2013), 293–313.

immediate precedent. Notably, the statue of Walther is positioned to face south, whilst the Dante in Trento faces north.³⁵

4. A complex iconography

During the nineteenth century, numerous statues and monuments were dedicated to Dante, but the Trento monument stands out for its remarkable dimensions and design.³⁶ Unlike most others, which typically feature a single statue with few symbols and inscriptions, this Dante is notable for its rich and multi-layered iconographic program, adding depth and complexity to its artistic representation.³⁷ The artwork measures seventeen meters in height, with a base of thirteen meters. It includes several inscriptions and a total of seventeen bronze statues. The statue of Dante on the top is five meters tall, as requested by the call for competition. It stands on a granite base divided into three levels, each dedicated to a different realm of the otherworld.

On the lowest level, the figure of Minos is striking, both in terms of its positioning and its imposing size and muscularity. This representation of Minos can be seen as a metonymy for the entirety of Hell, a unique choice in Dante iconography. Considering the role of Minos in the *Commedia*, its presence brings forth the concept of justice. From an artistic perspective, this figure draws inspiration from two notable European works of that time: first, the *Luzifer* by Franz von Stuck (1890–1891), which served as a point of reference for the symbolist movement; second, the *Penseur* by Auguste Rodin, initially conceived as a representation of Dante himself.³⁸

The third level of the monument is adorned with a bronze bas-relief that depicts angels and Beatrice overlooking the group below. Within this scene, we see the figures of Sordello, Virgil and

³⁵ The two monuments are referred to as an example of competing nation-building rhetoric by Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Rancor, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14:12-13.

³⁶ For pictures, please refer to the aforementioned virtual exhibition ‘[Obiettivo su Dante](#).’

³⁷ A fine aesthetic analysis of the monument and a reconstruction of the competition are provided by Bruno Passamani, “Il concorso per il monumento al sommo poeta. Una complessa vicenda di committenza,” in Maria Garbari and Bruno Passamani, eds., *Simboli e miti nazionali tra '800 e '900*. Atti del convegno di studi internazionale (Trento, 18-19 aprile 1997), (Trento: Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche, 1998), 63-113.

³⁸ Flavio Fergonzi, “Auguste Rodin e gli scultori italiani (1889-1915),” *Prospettiva* 89-90 (1998): 40-73. The *Penseur* was first exhibited at the Expo in Paris in 1889.

Dante. Hence, Dante is represented twice: as the author and “Genius of the nation” on top of the monument, and as a character in his poem here. This artistic choice further accentuates Dante’s significance and multifaceted presence within the composition. The part featuring Sordello holds a paramount significance within the iconographic and political program of the monument. It serves as the focal point that bridges the representation of the otherworld with the challenging task of visually translating the symbolic and identity value of the Italian language, as requested by the promoters. This part precisely represents the moment when Sordello recognizes Virgil, expressing his reverence by bowing and embracing him «là ’ve ’l minor s’appiglia» and praising him as the «gloria di Latin [...] per cui / mostrò ciò che potea la lingua nostra» (*Purg.* 7.15–17). This last line, carved on the foundation stone, serves as a meaningful caption that encapsulates the ultimate significance of the monument. In Dante’s poem the situation is indeed far from straightforward, as Virgil wrote in Latin and Sordello in Occitan, while Dante himself used the Italian vernacular. However, in the context of the Trento monument, the meaning of this *lingua nostra* is crystal clear: it refers to the Italian language, with Dante (the implicit subject of the sentence) serving as its champion.

If this is the precise moment represented by Zocchi, the episode of Sordello as a whole bears further significance. In *Purgatorio* 6, Sordello does not know who the pilgrims are yet, but recognizes Virgil as a fellow citizen of Mantua, rising up to hug him. This scene prompts Dante’s famous invective to Italy, that stigmatizes the internal conflicts and the discord plaguing the peninsula. Hence, this part of the monument effectively symbolized also love for the fatherland and fraternity between fellow citizens.

On the remaining part of the central frame, there are twelve more statues arranged in different groupings. On the rear side, a prostrate sinner represents the greedy souls, whilst a female soul is ascending to heaven after purification. Only in a private exchange with Zocchi, Ranzi revealed to read it as a representation of a liberated Trentino. On the east side, three figures depict onlookers witnessing the encounter between Sordello and Virgil. The other statues represent the envious with sewn eyes. On the west side, two indolent figures represent the moral inertia of fellow countrymen who did not actively support the national cause. Lastly, two proud souls are carrying their stones, symbolizing the burden of pride and arrogance.

The Purgatory section of the monument underwent several modifications before attaining its present arrangement, and it is the one on which Ranzi impacted the most. Despite his aversion to allegory, he articulated a series of symbolic representations that aimed to elucidate, in the most comprehensible manner, the overarching significance of the monument. Nearly all of his proposals were accepted by Zocchi, resulting in a cohesive and meaningful artistic composition.



Figure 5. By Nicola Eccher (2012). Trento, Fototeca di catalogazione - Soprintendenza per i beni culturali - Provincia autonoma di Trento.

Finally, let us turn our attention to the Dante statue positioned at the top, with his right arm raised towards the north (fig. 5). For decades, this gesture has been associated with the notion of marking the border or pointing towards Vienna, or as a warning to foreigners. During Fascism, it was easily read as a Roman salute. However, not a single description of the monument at the time of its inauguration, or even in the aftermath of the war, interpreted it

as such. By unanimous consent, Dante is protecting those passing by (as a matter of fact, he is depicted looking downward). His hand strikingly resembles the protective gesture of Christian Renaissance iconography, such as in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks* (fig. 6).³⁹ The positioning of the hand can evoke a sense of shelter, guidance, and benevolence, reinforcing the idea of Dante's role as a guardian figure.



Figure 6. Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Public domain.

The various interpretations of this gesture aptly illustrate the dynamic nature of the monument and its evolving meaning over time. Tracing its story from 1890 to the post-war period, this

³⁹ I am grateful to Heather Webb for bringing this resemblance to my attention during the seminar at Warwick. Her observation aligns perfectly with Zocchi's academic culture, which was deeply influenced by Renaissance aesthetics. The Dante drawings by Botticelli and Zuccari served as a model for the Trento monument. See Pegoretti, *Dante a Trento!*, 83-88 and 97-98.

artwork reveals the paramount power of national symbols and their inherent flexibility, not to say ambiguity. The grandiose ceremonies held during the 1921 Dante centenary, commemorating Italian victory and Trento's "redemption," marked a significant turning-point. In the following decades, even during the Republican era, the irredentist interpretation of the monument prevailed in both historiography and public perception, overshadowing the complex negotiations of a multinational perspective.