

## Medieval(ist) Approaches to the *Divine Comedy*: Dante's Gate of Hell in Recent Imagery

Karl Fugelso, Towson University

Through me the way into the sorrowful city,  
through me the way into the eternal grief,  
through me the way among the lost.

Justice moved my high maker:  
the divine power made me,  
the highest wisdom and the first love.

Before me nothing else was made  
if not eternal, and I eternally endure.  
Abandon every hope, you who enter.

(Per me si va ne la città dolente,  
per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,  
per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;  
fecemi la divina podestate,  
la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create  
se non eterne, e io eterno duro.  
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.)

--Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* 3.1-9<sup>1</sup>

Several years ago, I noted that:

from the early twentieth century on, significantly fewer *Inferno* illustrators depict the gate [of hell]; many who do include it angle it at least somewhat away from the viewer; and those who show it frontally often strongly resist interpretations of it as a direct invitation for the viewer to enter the underworld, much less Dante's hell in particular.<sup>2</sup>

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1 For the authoritative edition of Dante's text, see "*La Commedia*" secondo l'antica vulgate, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi. Società Dantesca Italiana, Edizione Nazionale. 4 vols. (1966-68; 2nd edn Florence: Le Lettere, 1994). This and all other translations in this essay are my own.

2 Though the collection in which this quotation appears is to be published later this year as the second volume of the ongoing series *Reading Dante with Images: A Visual Lectura Dantis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021-), which is edited by Matthew Collins and Luca Marcozzi, my chapter, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," like all the others in the volume, was written prior to 2022 and has been circulating since then in manuscript form and as conference presentations.

After giving an example from Tom Phillips' 1983 *livre d'artiste*, I went on to argue that Phillips and many other post-nineteenth-century artists see the gate as not (so much) an opportunity to invite viewers to Dante's hell, as to "suggest other scenarios in the text--or, more often, outside of it--that have relevance to our lives."<sup>3</sup> In this essay I would like to explore those remarks in much more depth and relative to many more forms of expression. By analyzing the portal's depiction over the last 125 years in not only such rarefied venues as *livres d'artiste* and easel paintings but also such mass media as movies and comic books, I would like to offer a broader perspective on whether and to what degree twentieth- and twenty-first-century artists have, in fact, responded to Dante's conflation of the reader and narrator-protagonist.

In a 1984 essay John Freccero observes that the inscription over the gate of hell is presented in Dante's text, particularly early manuscripts of it, as if the reader were the Pilgrim.<sup>4</sup> Without forewarning at the end of Canto Two, the third canto begins with the inscription and may thereby lure readers into unknowingly re-creating the narrator-protagonist's actions within the text. Though Dante as author, narrator, and protagonist had previously addressed his audience directly, as when exclaiming "And behold [...] a leopard lithe and very fast" (*Inf.* 1.31-32: "Ed ecco [...] una lonza leggiara e presta molto"), and had repeatedly incorporated the reader in actions and observations, as when describing the *Commedia*'s opening moment as "the middle of our life's way" (*Inf.* 1.1: "Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita"), not until the beginning of the third canto does the author fully conflate his audience with the Pilgrim. By not distinguishing the inscription from the more overtly intermediated text prior to it, Dante has the reader repeat the protagonist's supposed action upon encountering the portal's words. Moreover, the earliest readers of the *Commedia* would not have had purely visual clues that they were, indeed, being conflated with the protagonist, for, unlike most modern publishers, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century scribes did not differentiate the inscription via all capital letters, a different font, or any other means.<sup>5</sup>

3 Fugelso, "Inferno 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 53. For Phillips' illustration, see *Dante's "Inferno": The First Part of the "Divine Comedy" by Dante Alighieri*, trans. and ill. by Tom Phillips (London: Talfourd Press, 1983; rev. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 286. For more on Phillips' *Commedia* illustrations in particular, begin with my "Neomedievalisms in Tom Phillips' *Commedia* Illustrations," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 26 (2011): 27-35; idem, "Tom Phillips' Dante," in *Cahier Calin: Makers of the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Utz and Elizabeth Emery (Kalamazoo, MI: Studies in Medievalism, 2011), 47-55; and idem, "My Own Private Dante: Tom Phillips' Symbolic *Inferno*," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 31 (2016): 154-161, <<https://ywim.net/previous-issues/ywim-31-2016/>>, last accessed October 25, 2025. For discussion of Phillips' interpretation within the broader spectrum of Anglo-Italian responses to the *Commedia*, begin with Christopher Lehner, *Depicting Dante in Anglo-Italian Literary and Visual Arts: Allegory, Authority and Authenticity* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016). For a first-hand perspective on how to situate these illustrations within Phillips' oeuvre, see the artist's *Tom Phillips: Works and Texts* (New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1992). For a third-hand perspective on how to do so, begin with Joachim Möller, "Dante, English," in *Dantes "Göttliche Komödie": Drucke und Illustrationen aus sechs Jahrhunderten*, ed. Lutz S. Malke (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2000), 153-82 (168-82).

4 John Freccero, "Infernal Irony: The Gates of Hell," *MLN* 99/4 (September 1984): 769-786.

5 For more on this, see Freccero, "Infernal Irony," passim; my "Engaging the Viewer: Reading Structures and Narrative Strategies in Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy*," diss. Columbia University in New York (1999), 94-97; idem, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*: Renaissance Responses to a 'Medieval' Text," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 15 (2000): 83-106 (88-89), <<https://ywim.net/previous-issues/ywim-15-2000/>>, last accessed October 25, 2025; idem, "The Artist as Reader: Buffalmacco's Illuminations for the *Divine Comedy*," *Dante Studies* 122 (2004): 137-71 (159-60); and idem, "Inferno 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 47.

Thus, many readers, particularly during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, would have been polyvalently encouraged to at least initially identify with the Pilgrim.

That spell would presumably be broken in many and perhaps all cases by at least the canto's fourth stanza, for, immediately after finishing the inscription, the narrator-protagonist notes, "These dark-colored words I saw written at the top of a portal" (*Inf.* 3.10-11: "Queste parole di colore oscuro/ vid' io scritte al sommo d'una porta"). But even a momentary conflation with the Pilgrim may be enough to render the rest of the *Commedia* more immediate, engaging, and relevant to the reader. They may have more empathy with the protagonist and perhaps with other characters in the text and may therefore take the plot and its many messages more to heart, particularly during the many subsequent passages couched in the second-person or plural first-person tense.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the literary benefits such immediacy may have, it, of course, also has particular resonance for a text as religious in nature as the *Commedia*. And fourteenth- and perhaps fifteenth-century illuminators were almost certainly aware of at least some of those implications. As I have noted in multiple publications, most of the gate's fifteenth-century illuminators have it face towards a figure of the Pilgrim approaching from the viewer's left (Fig. 1).<sup>7</sup>

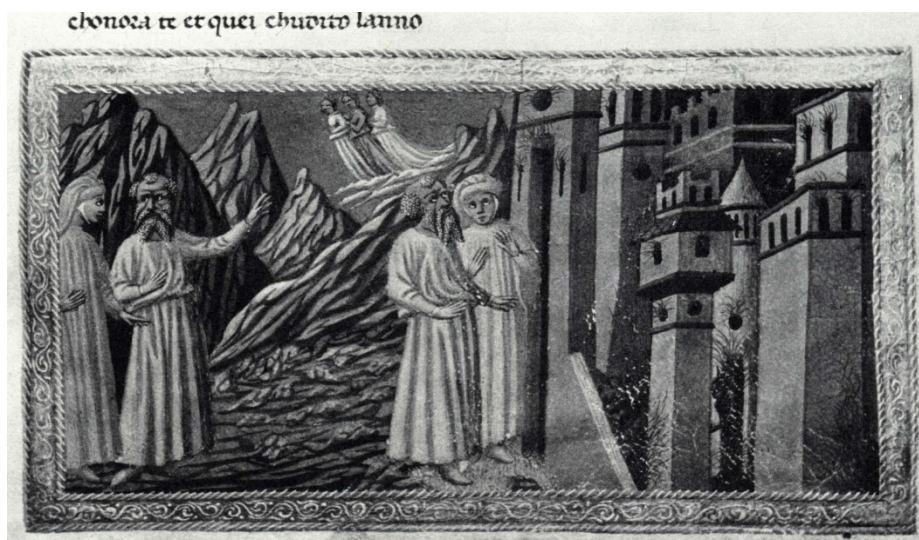


Figure 1. Vecchietta, *Inferno* 3, mid-1440s, British Museum MS Yates Thompson 36, fol. 3, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>6</sup> Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 89; idem, "The Artist as Reader," 158-59; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 47.

<sup>7</sup> Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 95-97; idem, "Regional Medievalisms in Academia: Pictorial vs. Textual Responses to the *Divine Comedy*," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 23 (2009): 51-61 (53); and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 49-51. For a color reproduction, see <[https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc\\_100165175579.0x000001](https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc_100165175579.0x000001)>, last accessed December 18, 2025.



Like contemporaneous commentators, almost all of whom focus on the *Commedia*'s secular virtues, they give no indication that the gate plays a role outside the visual narrative, much less has direct implications for the audience.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, all fourteenth-century illuminators turn the gate so that it opens at least somewhat towards the viewer and away from the Pilgrim (Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup>



Figure 2. Anonymous Neapolitan, *Inferno* 3, mid-1370s, British Museum MS Additional 19587, fol. 4r, © The Trustees of the British Museum.

That is, they overtly break from the pictorial narrative's otherwise left-to-right trajectory and, like the many Trecento commentators who claim Dante had divine insight to the afterlife, suggest his hell has immediate implications for the audience.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the early-fourteenth-century illuminators in Chantilly who adorned a Latin exegesis in which the Carmelite Guido da Pisa claims Dante actually visited the afterlife in some non-corporeal form angle the gate, its setting, and the following

8 Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 85-86, 97-100; idem, "Regional Medievalisms," 53; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 51.

9 Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 87-88, 94-95; idem, "Regional Medievalisms," 52; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 44-45.

10 Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 84-85, 92-94; idem, "Regional Medievalisms," 52-53; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 44-45.



image in such a way as to suggest the viewer has the exact same viewpoint as the Pilgrim.<sup>11</sup>

Like Fra Guido himself, who probably advised these artists, they present the *Inferno* as a lived experience of utmost importance to the audience in not only overall theme but also every detail.<sup>12</sup>

Such insistence that God granted Dante first-hand experience in the afterlife does not, to my knowledge, recur in any other depiction of the *Commedia*. Yet, as I noted in my aforementioned survey, frontal depictions of Dante's gate may be found in not only many other fourteenth- and even some fifteenth-century miniatures but also quite a few later illustrations of the *Commedia*.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the gate is fully frontal in the two most famous late-sixteenth-century cycles of *Inferno* images: Federico Zuccaro's tinted drawings from 1586-88 (Fig. 3),



Figure 3. Federico Zuccaro, Dante and Virgil Exiting the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1586-1588.

11 Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 87-90; idem, "The Artist as Reader," 156-59; idem, "Regional Medievalisms," 52; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 45-46. For a reproduction of this image, which was overseen by a Tuscan master that may have been Francesco Traini or Buonamico Buffalmacco, on folio 48r of Musée Condé MS 597, see the digital copy at <<https://portail.bibliissima.fr/ark:/43093/mdataee3d436d2a6bdb920f7ee2dbb0b2dfdb21886d38>>, last accessed December 18, 2025.

12 Fugelso, "Historicizing the *Divine Comedy*," 90-92; idem, "The Artist as Reader," 160; and idem, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 46-49.

13 Fugelso, "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 53.

and Giovanni Stradano's tinted prints from 1588.<sup>14</sup>

But both of those artists depict Dante coming through the portal toward us. Though they construct a viewpoint that suggests we are already familiar with the underworld, they do not usher us into hell as overtly as would an exterior view of the portal opening toward us, and they clearly do not conflate us with the Pilgrim.

For even a shared view with him we must wait until William Blake's 102 *Commedia* illustrations, which he began for his patron John Linnell in 1824 and which remained unfinished at Blake's death in 1827.<sup>15</sup> In the first of his three ink-and-watercolor paintings for *Inferno* 3, Blake portrays Virgil holding Dante by the hand and leading him across the threshold of a portal that opens not only directly toward them but also us and the rest of the world outside of hell (Fig. 4).

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14 For an internet copy of Stradano's print "Dante and Virgil Exiting the Gate of Hell," *Inferno* 3, see <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stradano\\_Inferno\\_Canto\\_03\\_A.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stradano_Inferno_Canto_03_A.jpg)>, last accessed December 18, 2025. For more on Zuccaro's and Stradano's *Commedia* illustrations, particularly in relationship to each other, begin with Liana De Girolamo Cheney, "Illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*: A Comparative Study of Sandro Botticelli, Giovanni Stradano, and Federico Zuccaro," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Studies* 4.8 (2016), at <DOI:10.17265/2328-2177/2016.08.002>, last accessed July 24, 2025. For more on Zuccaro's illustrations in particular, begin with Andrea Mazzucchi's commentary in *Dante historiato da Federico Zuccaro* (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2004). See also Corrado Gizzi, *Federico Zuccari e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1993), which is the catalog for an exhibition of Zuccaro's work at Casa di Dante in Abruzzo, Italy, September 26-November 30, 1993. For more on Stradano's *Commedia* illustrations in particular, see Gizzi, *Giovanni Stradano e Dante* (Milan: Electa, 1994), which is the catalog for an exhibition of Stradano's work at Casa di Dante in Abruzzo, Italy, October 1-November 30, 1994.

15 For a good and widely accessible entry point to the considerable literature on Blake's *Commedia* illustrations (and his perception of Dante's spirituality), see David Bindman's introduction to his *"The Divine Comedy": William Blake* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'Image, 2000).



Figure 4. William Blake, Virgil and Dante Enter the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, c. 1824-27.

We are not conflated with the Pilgrim, but we are in some senses aligned with him, and, as he is already almost within the portal, the inscription may now apply more to us than to him. We would seem to be the ones who should surrender ourselves to divine justice.<sup>16</sup>

And this perspective is reinforced in its literal and figurative angle by Blake's annotations on Henry Boyd's English translation of the *Commedia* and by oral remarks Blake made to Linnel and the diarist Henry Crabb Robinson. While Blake repeatedly and vehemently condemned Dante for ascribing Hell to God rather than Lucifer<sup>17</sup> and for not assigning sufficient compassion to God,<sup>18</sup> Robinson notes that Blake insisted Dante was a better and more inspired theologian than even Emanuel Swedenborg, for, Dante "was the greater poet" and promoted divine "truth," apart from when he was tainted by "political objects."<sup>19</sup> That is, in accord with not only his

16 As noted in my "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 52-53.

17 For example, in figure 22 on page 63 of Bindman's "*The Divine Comedy*": William Blake, on a diagram of Hell that may represent Virgil's *Inferno* 11 description of the underworld, Blake wrote at lower left, "It seems as if Dante's supreme Good was something Superior to the Father or Jesus; for if he gives his rain to the Evil & the Good, & his Sun to the Just & the Unjust, He could never have Built Dante's Hell, nor the Hell of the Bible neither, in the way our Parsons explain it--It must have been originally Formed by the devil Himself; & So I understand it to have been."

18 For example, in the lower right corner of the diagram referenced above in my previous note, Blake claims, "Whatever Book is for Vengeance for Sin & Whatever Book is Against the Forgiveness of Sins is not of the Father, but of Satan the Accuser & Father of Hell."

19 See Bindman, "*The Divine Comedy*": William Blake, 32-33.



own frontal gate but also those of many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century predecessors, Blake apparently held that, while not every detail of the *Commedia* may be true and relevant to the reader's life, Dante's larger precepts and conclusions are, and a broad understanding of the *Commedia* allows for, and perhaps even enhances, perception of true divinity.<sup>20</sup>

This is a far cry from the *Commedia* as treated by most subsequent commentators and from Dante's gate of hell as portrayed by perhaps all artists after Blake. Even his fellow Romantics, despite their affection for and interest in the Middle Ages, do not depict the portal opening fully towards us.<sup>21</sup> In a drawing from circa 1803, Joseph Anton Koch sketches the gate opening approximately 45 degrees to our left, towards Virgil and the Pilgrim approaching from that direction (Fig. 5).<sup>22</sup>

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20 Bindman makes this point (33) in the course of analyzing Blake's remarks, in large part by quoting William Butler Yeats' encapsulation of Blake's response to the *Commedia*: "Dante, because a great poet, was 'inspired by the Holy Ghost'; but his inspiration was mingled with a certain philosophy, blown up out of his age, which Blake held for mortal and the enemy of immortal things, and which from the earliest times has sat in high places and ruled the world. This philosophy was the philosophy of soldiers, of men of the world, of priests busy with government, of all who, because of the absorption in active life, have been persuaded to judge and to punish.... Opposed to this was another philosophy, not made by men of action, drudges of time and space, but by Christ when wrapped in the divine essence, and by artists and poets, who are taught by the nature of their craft to sympathize with all living things." (For the original, see W. B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* [New York, Macmillan: 1903], 197-99.)

21 As noted but not really explained by me in "*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 53.

22 For more on Koch and his *Commedia* prints and drawings, begin with Marie Ursula Riemann-Reyher, "Dantes Traum der Läuterung--Brücke zwischen Klassizismus und Romantik," in *Dantes "Göttliche Komödie": Drucke und Illustrationen aus sechs Jahrhunderten*, 81-107. For the most recent academic source on Koch's Dante paintings and, to some degree, the rest of his responses to the *Commedia*, see Robert C. Evans, "The Dante Paintings of Joseph Anton Koch," in *Critical Insights: Dante Alighieri*, ed. Robert C. Evans (Ipswich, MA: Salem Press and Amedia, NY: Grey House Publishing, 2024), 174-91. See also discussion of them in my "Defining Medievalism in Nineteenth-Century *Commedia* Illustrations," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 19 (2004): 5-25 (6-12); idem, "*Commedia* Images in the Neo-Gothic Age(s)," in *Studies in Medievalism XIV: Correspondences: Medievalism in Scholarship and the Arts*, ed. Tom Shippey and Martin Arnold (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 173-197; and idem, "Neomedievalism as Revised Medievalism in *Commedia* Illustrations," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 22 (2008): 55-61.



Figure 5. Joseph Anton Koch, Virgil and Dante Enter the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, c.1803.

For an 1840 edition of the *Commedia*, Domenico Fabris portrays the exterior of the gate at least somewhat frontally and without a figure of the Pilgrim or his guide, but only the very top of the portal is shown, as his etching centers not on that cave mouth but on a scribbled, completely illegible stanza above it (Fig. 6).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, 3 vols., ed. Giovanni Battista Niccolini, ill. Domenico Fabris (Florence: Artistico tipografico Fabris, 1840-42). Fabris' illustrations have yet to be the focus of any scholarly study and are only mentioned in passing in a few surveys of *Commedia* illustrations, such as Eugene Paul Nassar's *Illustrations to Dante's "Inferno"* (London et al: Associated University Presses, 1994).

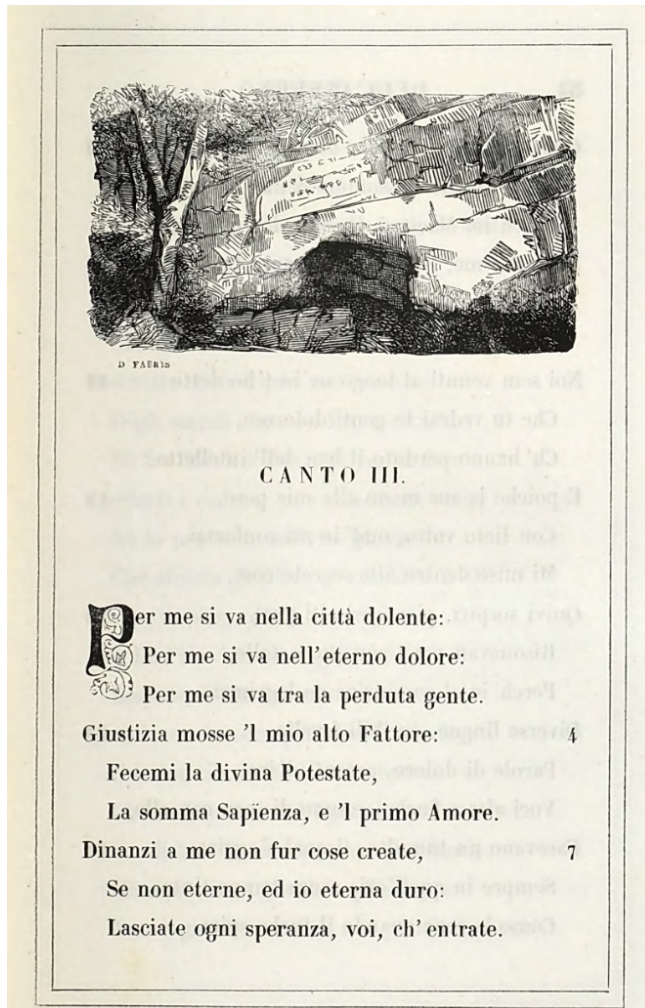


Figure 6. Domenico Fabris, The Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, c. 1840.

In an edition of the *Commedia* from fourteen years later, Antoine Étex depicts Virgil and Dante holding hands just to the right and inside of a cave mouth that is surmounted by an x-ray view of the inscription's last two lines seen in reverse and apparently facing out of the cave, while the portal itself is almost eclipsed by a ghostly group of cowards sweeping over Acheron at far right.<sup>24</sup> For perhaps the most famous, widely disseminated, and oft-copied series of *Commedia* engravings, Gustave Doré depicts the portal in approximately 1861 as a cave mouth that may be parallel to the surface of the image but definitely caters more to the Pilgrim standing at right than to us, for our view is largely blocked by a ridge in the left foreground.<sup>25</sup>

24 Dante Alighieri, *La Divine comédie: L'Enfer, le Purgatoire, le Paradis*, ed. Louis Barré, trans. Sébastien Rhéa, ill. Antoine Étex (Paris: J. Bry aîné, 1854). While there is very little secondary literature on Étex, much less his *Commedia* illustrations, his memoirs provide insight on his art and approach to sources: *Les souvenirs d'un artiste* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1877).

25 For widely available reproductions of all Doré's *Commedia* engravings, see the collection published by Dover Press (Mineola, NY) in 1995. For perhaps the best recent introduction to them and to the reaction to them, see Aida Audeh, "Gustave Doré's Illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy*: Innovation, Influence, and Reception," in *Studies in Medievalism XVII: Defining Medievalism(s) II*, ed. Karl Fugelso (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 125-64.



And in an 1879 series of engravings that otherwise closely resembles Doré's, Yan' Dargent echoes Zuccaro and Stradano in showing Virgil and Dante coming towards of the bright, rock-lined chasm.<sup>26</sup> In accord with most late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers on the *Commedia*, with the comparatively cerebral and secular approach of, say, Charles Baudelaire or Matthew Arnold or with the overtly passionate but no less secular approach of, say, John Keats or William Wordsworth, Dargent, Doré, Étex, Fabris, and Koch may celebrate Dante's text for its literary and/or historical virtue, but they also join those contemporaneous authors in not promoting the possibility that the *Commedia* contains divine insight on the afterlife.<sup>27</sup>

And that tendency continues after the Romantic era, in not only many twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts on the *Commedia* but also contemporaneous depictions of the gate, which often opens conspicuously away from the viewer. In Tancredi Scarpelli's color print for a 1907 edition translated into prose by Manfredo Manfredini the portal opens towards the Pilgrim and his guide approaching from the right side of the image and almost perpendicular to the viewer's perspective (Fig. 7).<sup>28</sup>

26 Dante Alighieri, *La divine comédie*, ed. and trans. Artaud de Montor, intro. M. Louis Moland, ill. Yan' Dargent (Paris: Garnier Frères Libraires-Éditeurs, 1879). For an introduction to Dargent's oeuvre, including his *Commedia* illustrations, begin with André Cariou & Dominique Radufe, *Yan' Dargent 1824-1899* (Quimper: Musée des beaux-arts de Quimper, 1999), which accompanied an exhibition at the musée December 3, 1999-March 27, 2000.

27 For more on Baudelaire's approach to the *Commedia*, begin with Francesca La Marca, "Dante's *Divine Comedy* as Intertext of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*," *French Studies Bulletin* 24 (2003): 9-15. For more on Arnold's approach to the *Commedia*, begin with his lectures on the *Commedia*, which have been published repeatedly, perhaps most accessibly in *Lectures and Essays in Criticism: The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), and for a recent entry point to the considerable, very scattered sources on his approach, begin with Federica Coluzzi, "Rediscovering Matthew Arnold: The Commonplace Reader (of Dante)," *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 49.1 (2022): 113-36. For more on Keats' approach to the *Commedia*, begin with Antonella Braidà's chapter, "John Keats and Dante: Speaking the Gods' Language," in her *Dante and the Romantics* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 128-50. For more on Wordsworth's approach to the *Commedia*, begin with Joseph Luzzi's chapter "Wordsworth, Dante, and British Romantic Identity," in his *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 141-60. For a more general discussion of nineteenth-century commentators' approaches to the *Commedia*, begin with Braidà's *Dante and the Romantics*, or my "Regional Medievalisms," 55-56.

28 Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, trans. into prose by Manfredo Manfredini, ill. Tancredi Scarpelli and Manfredo Manfredini (Florence: Nerbini, 1907). Though Manfredini's *Commedia* illustrations have attracted occasional comments amid surveys such as Nassar's *Illustrations to Dante's "Inferno"*, Scarpelli's are usually mentioned only in passing, often by scholars focusing on Manfredini's work.

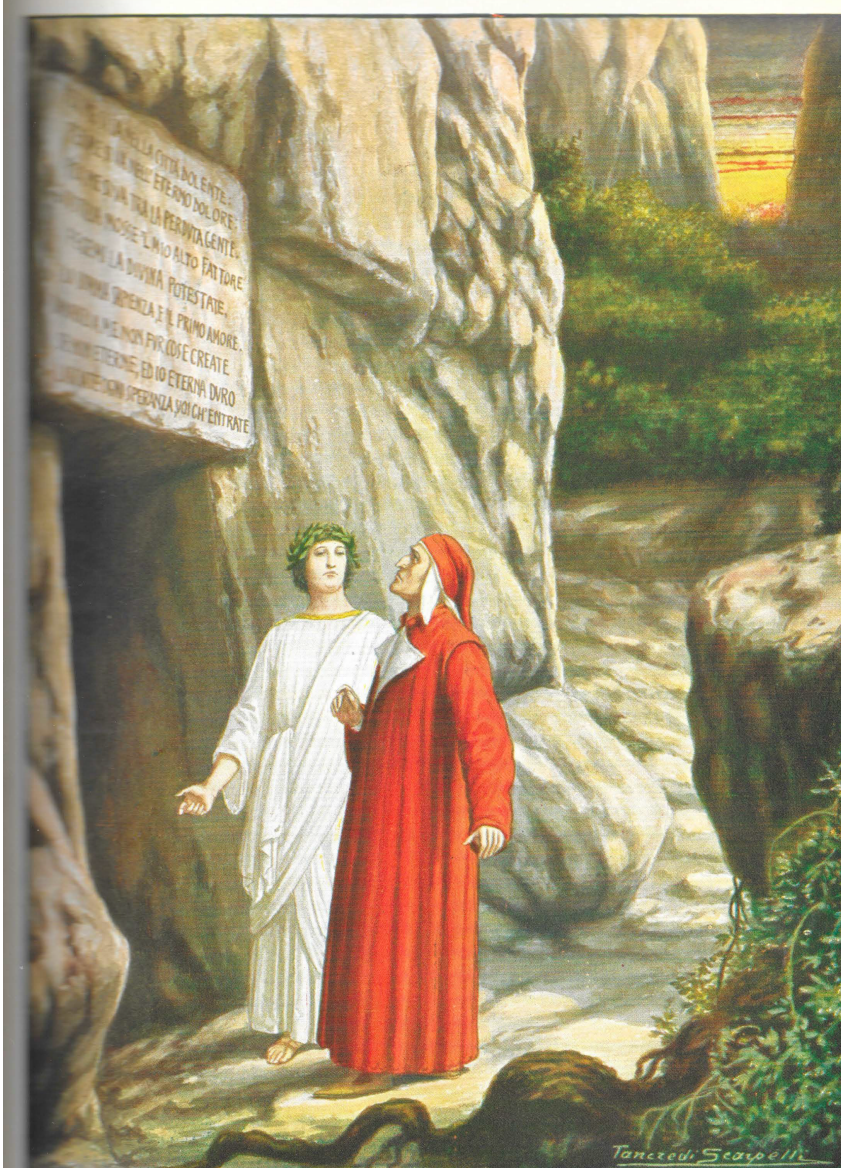


Figure 7. Tancredi Scarpelli, Dante and Virgil  
Enter the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1907.

Director Giuseppe de Liguoro's 1911 film of the *Inferno* has Virgil and the Pilgrim move from left to right past a near wall of rock that almost completely blocks our view of the portal, before the movie cuts to a perspective from behind the figures as they enter the gate.<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Colucci's 1928 woodblock print portrays the gateway opening somewhat towards our right, judging from the presence of shadows solely on the right side of the portal's interior edge and despite the fact that the partial

<sup>29</sup> *Inferno*, dir. Giuseppe de Liguoro, prod. Milano Films, distrib. Helios (1911), 00:07:34 and 00:07:44, at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfZraM2oIMY>>, last accessed December 18, 2025. Though this film has attracted a great deal of attention, as the oldest surviving full-length feature film and as a blockbuster of its time, it has rarely been discussed in detail, much less in monographic studies, and is perhaps best approached through John P. Welle's chapter, "Early Cinema, Dante's *Inferno* of 1911, and the Origins of the Italian Film Culture," in *Dante, Cinema, and Television*, ed. Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 21-50.

inscription above the entrance seems to face directly towards the foreground heads of Virgil and the Pilgrim.<sup>30</sup> George Grosz's 1944 pen-and-ink illustration of the portal for a *Commedia* translation that year is cropped at right but, in revealing the inner left wall of the entranceway, he suggests that it snakes off to the right and opens slightly towards our left, towards the figures of Virgil and Dante.<sup>31</sup> For Guido Martina and Angelo Bioletto's 1949-50 comic book "L'inferno di Topolino," which was spread across six volumes of the serial *Topolino*, Bioletto depicts the portal opening fully to the left as a Mickey Mouse Pilgrim and his Goofy guide approach it in profile from that direction.<sup>32</sup> In Emma Mazza's 1956 tinted drawing of *Inferno* 3 the inscription over the gate and perhaps the edge of the portal itself would appear to be parallel to the surface of the page, but the full view through that opening to the tunnel's left wall would suggest the entrance opens in that direction and away from us and the Pilgrim, who stands with Virgil on a cliff at right.<sup>33</sup> Sandow Birk's lithograph of Canto Three for his and Marcus Sanders' 2003 translation of the *Inferno* updates Dante's text by relocating it to a twenty-first-century city filled with satirical adaptations of common urban landmarks, such as a sign indicating that the gate of hell leads to "lower level" parking, but the print otherwise closely follows Doré's engraving, with a portal whose lip may be parallel to the frame but probably is not, the Pilgrim and his guide approaching it from the left, and the right side of the cave's interior blocking our view just beyond the entrance.<sup>34</sup> Seymour Chwast's 2010 graphic novel of a film-noir *Commedia* portrays the gate as a nightclub entrance in the form of a devil mouth labeled "HELL" and opening towards the near left, where it is approached by Virgil in a tuxedo and bowler hat and by the Pilgrim in a trenchcoat, fedora, and sunglasses.<sup>35</sup> Piero Cattaneo's 2021 watercolor illustration for Dami Editore's Miti

30 Dante Alighieri, *L'enfer*, trans. Auguste Brizeux, ill. Gio Colucci (Paris: L'enseigne Du Pot Cassé, 1928).

31 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. J. A. Carlyle, Thomas Okey, and P. H. Wicksteed, ill. George Grosz et al. (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1944). For a contemporaneous response to Grosz's *Commedia* images, see Angeline H. Lograsso, "The Grosz Illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*," *Italica* 21.2 (June 1944): 86-87. For an entry point to the vast literature on Grosz and his art, specifically the period to which his Dante illustrations pertain, begin with the essays in the exhibition catalog for a show at the David Nolan Galleries, New York, September 15-October 30, 2009, *George Grosz: The Years in America, 1933-1958*, ed. Jürg Judin (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2010).

32 Guido Martina, "L'inferno di Topolino," ill. Angelo Bioletto, in *Topolino* (October 1949-March 1950). For an entry point to the considerable number of academic responses to this series, and specifically to sources on how Martina and Bioletto interpret the *Commedia*, see my "A Mickey Mouse *Inferno*: Medievalist Legacies and the Marketing of the Middle Ages," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 33 (2018): 40-48, at, <<https://ywim.net/previous-issues/ywim-33-2018/>>, last accessed November 19, 2025.

33 Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia*, comm. Giovanni Roatta, intro. Silvano Gratilli, ill. Emma Mazza (Turin: SAIE, Soc. Az. Internazionale Ed., 1956).

34 Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Marcus Sanders and Sandow Birk, ill. Sandow Birk (2003; repr. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004). For an internet copy, see <<https://sandowbirk.com/divine-comedy>>, last accessed December 18, 2025. For a recent, scholarly entry point to the rapidly growing literature on this series, see Kristina M. Olson, "Dante in a Global World: Sandow Birk's *Divine Comedy*," in *The Unexpected Dante: Perspectives on the "Divine Comedy"*, ed. Lucia Alma Wolf (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2021), 47-59. See also her article "Dante's Urban American Vernacular: Sandow Birk's *Divine Comedy*," in *Dante Studies: The Annual Publication of the Dante Society of America* 131, which is a special edition devoted to "New Voices in Dante Criticism" (2013): 143-69, and, for a contrasting viewpoint, see my "Dante as Surfer Medievalism: Sandow Birk's *Commedia* Illustrations," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 25 (2010): 146-54.

35 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and ill. Seymour Chwast (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). For an internet copy, see <<https://www.michaelspornanimation.com/splog/?p=2466>>, last



Oro picture books defines the gate as a rectangular cave mouth opening approximately 45 degrees to our left as the Pilgrim and his guide approach it in profile from that direction.<sup>36</sup> And in all these ways of catering more towards a visible figure of the Pilgrim than towards us, the portals apparently match the verbal commentaries from their time.

Though it is, of course, impossible to know everything that has been said about the *Commedia* in the last 125 years, an on-line search in the *Bibliografia Dantesca Internazionale/International Dante Bibliography* database and in general does not reveal any twentieth- or twenty-first-century speakers or writers who treat the *Commedia* as a true and authoritative account of the afterlife, much less who join Guido da Pisa and his artistic collaborators in portraying Dante's text as a lived experience.<sup>37</sup> Like many commentators between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, Dorothy Sayers, C. S. Lewis, and numerous other post-nineteenth-century writers credit Dante as highly learned about religion and even as something of a theologian, but they rarely present him as unique in that learning or even in his viewpoints, and they sometimes go so far as to portray him as a spokesperson for contemporaneous Catholicism.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, they often treat that learning as just one element in a wide range of knowledge encompassing science, literature, and many other subjects that are not overtly religious, if indeed they are at all.<sup>39</sup> In accord with contemporaneous artists, they suggest that, while the *Commedia* may have tremendous secular merit, it does not have any theological relevance to us beyond what it reflects about Christianity up to and including the very early fourteenth century, that, contrary to what Dante suggests, he was not divinely privileged and did not have unique knowledge of the afterlife.

Of course, this is not to say—by way of contrast or otherwise—that even the fully frontal gates in post-Romantic illustrations are meant to indicate Dante's text is of vital importance for the viewer's soul. Indeed, the circumstances in which frontal gates recur from the early twentieth century on suggest, as I generally surmised in

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accessed December 18, 2025. For more on Chwast's *Commedia* illustrations, particularly as filtered through film noir, begin with my "Dante as Sam Spade: Seymour Chwast's Adaptation of the *Divine Comedy*," *The Year's Work in Medievalism* 27 (2012): 2-8, at <<https://ywim.net/previous-issues/ywim-27-2012/>>, last accessed November 19, 2025.

36 Piero Selva, "La Divina Commedia": *l'immortale racconto di Dante Alighieri*, intro. Mino Milani, ill. Piero Cataneo (Casalecchio di Reno: Dami Editore, 2021). For more on this and other picture books of the *Commedia*, particularly what they reflect about the sophistication of young, anticipated readers, see my forthcoming article, "Commedia Picture-Books: Medievalism and Nationalism in Modern Expectations for Dante's Youngest Audiences."

37 For that *Bibliografia Dantesca Internazionale/International Dante Bibliography* database, see <<https://dantesca.ntc.it/dnt-fo-catalog/pages/material-search.jsf>>, last accessed July 24, 2025.

38 For more on Sayers' approach to the *Commedia*, begin with her Penguin Classics translation and annotations of *Inferno* (1949), *Purgatorio* (1955), and, with posthumous assistance from Barbara Reynolds, *Paradiso* (1962), as well as Sayers' two relevant collections of essays: *Introductory Papers on Dante* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), and *Further Papers on Dante* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957). For external perspectives of that approach, begin with Chris Willerton, "Dorothy L. Sayers, Dante, and the Modern Reader," *Journal of Inklings Studies* 3.2 (2013): 41-58. For more on C. S. Lewis' approach to the *Commedia*, begin with his multiple Dante essays in his *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). For a widely accessible entry point to external perspectives on Lewis' approach in not only his prose but also his fiction, begin with Marsha Daigle-Williamson's *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's "Divine Comedy" in the Novels of C. S. Lewis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015).

39 Ibid.

my preliminary survey several years ago, that many of these portals lack that particular theme and are only broad acknowledgments of the viewer and of the impact the *Commedia* may have on its audience.<sup>40</sup> To begin with, though some of the portals may be partly parallel to the surface of the image, the rest of each one often joins Mazza's in departing from that angle and/or catering more to the Pilgrim and his guide. Though F. M. Roganeau foreshadows Mazza in having a threshold and, in this case, inscription that may open directly towards us, his colored illustrations for a 1912 French edition of the *Commedia* also echo hers in portraying the rest of the entrance as a cave that curves away and to the left, indeed that caters even more than hers to Dante and Virgil, for Roganeau depicts the Pilgrim and his guide as almost across the portal's threshold and free of physical obstacles to the underworld (Fig. 8).<sup>41</sup>



Figure 8. F. M. Roganeau, Virgil and Dante in Front of the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1912.

In a 1925 woodblock print of the gate, Klaus Wrage turns the upper portion of the entrance directly towards the viewer, but spatially and conceptually blocks our access to it with a bust-length view of Dante breaking the “fourth wall” and gazing directly at

40 Fugelso, “*Inferno* 3: Gateway Across the Centuries,” 53-59.

41 Dante Alighieri, “*La divine comédie*”: *vingt-quatre planches hors texte en couleurs*, ed. Teodor de Wyzewa, ill. F. M. Roganeau (Paris: H. Laurens, 1912).

us from the near foreground.<sup>42</sup> Ebba Holm's comparatively enormous entrance and the full inscription above it in her 1929 woodblock print face directly towards us, but they, too, may not cater solely to us, for at lower left is a tiny figure of Virgil with his right arm around Dante and his left arm making a sweeping gesture towards the portal as they approach it from a 45-degree angle.<sup>43</sup> In Robert Rauschenberg's 1958 multi-media illustration *Canto III: The Vestibule of Hell, The Opportunists*, from his series *Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's "Inferno"*, the gate may open directly towards us, but we can hardly be sure of its direction, because the lintel and jambs are largely overlayed with scribbled transfers and because the inscription is represented only by fragments of it and related texts within and to the left of the gate.<sup>44</sup> In 1965 Vaquero Turcios depicted the entrance as a hooked ladder descending into a black quadrangle that would seem to be reflecting the walls above it and therefore to resemble a black pool to which we, particularly in the absence of figures of Virgil and Dante, may be invited, but the ladder is on the far side of the quadrangle from us and we appear to be looking somewhat down and to the left at it.<sup>45</sup> That same year, Karl Kunz portrayed the portal as a rather liquid mouth that may open directly towards us but is ultimately indeterminable in its angle, for it is embedded in a surreal cliff face that has no explicit direction markers and may face towards the wavy, elongated figures of Virgil and Dante at left.<sup>46</sup> Mario Marioni's pen-and-ink rendition also depicts the portal as the mouth of a monster and also comes from 1965, but, perched above the heading for *Inferno* 3 in Giulio Topi's edition, the sketch is so small that it is difficult to be sure whether it opens amid a pile of rocks only towards us or whether those rocks are, in fact, figures, including perhaps the

42 Klaus Wrage, *Dante-Block-Buch* (Freiburg: Klaus Wrage, 1925). Wrage's prints were featured alongside Ebba Holm's (see below) in the show "Höllenschwarz und Sternenlicht Dantes *Göttliche Komödie* in Moderne und Gegenwart," at Berlin's Kupferstichkabinett, February 12-May 8, 2022. For a brief video introduction to the show and the work, see <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHgz618P1ws>>, last accessed July 24, 2025. For an internet copy of the print, see <<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/claude-wrage-dante-before-the-gates-of-hell>>, last accessed December 18, 2025.

43 Dante Alighieri, *Dante Alighieris "Guddommelige komedie"*, trans. Christian Knud Frederick Molbech, ed. Valdemar Vedel, ill. Ebba Holm (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gads Forlag, 1929). For more on Holm's *Commedia* work, see note 42, above.

44 Robert Rauschenberg, *Rauschenberg: XXXIV Drawings for Dante's "Inferno"*, comm. Dore Ashton (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964). For an internet copy of the illustration, see <<https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/artwork/canto-iii-vestibule-hell-opportunists-series-thirty-four-illustrations-dantes-inferno>>, last accessed December 18, 2025. For more on these illustrations, see the introduction to David Pike's *Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), esp. vii-viii; Dieter Scholz, "Das 20. Jahrhundert und die Inferno-Illustration," in *Dantes "Göttliche Komödie": Drucke und Illustrationen aus sechs Jahrhunderten*, 277-311, esp. 295-99; and my "Robert Rauschenberg's *Inferno* Illuminations," in *Studies in Medievalism XIII: Postmodern Medievalisms*, ed. Richard Utz and Jesse Swan (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 47-66.

45 Dante Alighieri, *La divina comedia*, trans. and intro. Antonio J. Onieva, ill. Vaquero Turcios, 3 vols. (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 1965). Though Turcios's illustrations have yet to be thoroughly studied, his thoughts on responding to the *Commedia* can be found in the third volume of this series, under the line "Come pintor che con esempio pinga....".

46 Karl Kunz, *Einundsechzig Illustrationen zum Inferno der "Göttlichen Komödie" des Dante Alighieri* (Bergisch Gladbach: G. Lübbe, 1965). For an internet copy of the illustration, see <[https://www.karlkunz.de/KKVG\\_html\\_Inf/4Inferno.html](https://www.karlkunz.de/KKVG_html_Inf/4Inferno.html)>, last accessed December 18, 2025. For more on those illustrations, begin with Max Bense's introduction to that collection, and see Ferruccio Ulivi's catalog for the exhibition *Le Tavole Dantesche di Karl Kunz* (Rome: Società Dante Alighieri/ Villa Massimo, 1970).



Pilgrim and his guide, marching into the gate.<sup>47</sup> Harry Bennett's ink-and-wash 1966 illustration for an English translation is so murky that it is difficult to determine whether the portal is fully frontal or not, but, in any case, it would seem to favor the figures of Virgil and Dante between us and it, as Virgil points to the inscription above tiny figures that are apparently closer to, and presumably just about to enter, the gate.<sup>48</sup> In Quinto Martini's 1985 black-and-white print from his series on the *Commedia*, the frontal gate does not appear to welcome figures of Virgil and Dante, but it is difficult to be sure, for, in the foreground and middle ground of this rather murky depiction, dozens of figures flood from Charon's bark in the foreground through the gate in the middle distance at right and on into an inky darkness.<sup>49</sup> And the same is often true for the hundreds of amateur and/or commercial illustrations of the gate that have been posted on-line since then and, in tandem with the expansion of the internet's reach and accessibility, appear to be multiplying exponentially. Particularly thanks to the growing ease, dissemination, and perhaps overlap of artificial intelligence (AI) in the last several years, myriad open gates frontally face the viewer but are often blocked at least in part by the Pilgrim, his guide, and/or swarms of anonymous souls, which are much easier to program with AI than to draw by hand or even with pre-AI software.<sup>50</sup>

Yet, even the few fully frontal, unblocked gates generated by AI do not appear to have any message for the viewer beyond a general reminder that hell awaits the sinful, for, like almost all the other internet gates and even some developed off-line, they are largely presented as textual orphans. While they may include or be accompanied by some or all of Dante's inscription over the gate, they rarely come with any other verbal interpretation or contextualization, apart, perhaps, from references to the process or means of generating the image itself.<sup>51</sup> That is, while the creators of these images never specifically deny that these images may be designed to put the viewer in the Pilgrim's shoes and to have the viewer experience the afterlife as immediately and completely as is implied by Guido da Pisa and the Chantilly

47 Dante Alighieri, *Della versione dell'“Inferno” di Dante*, trans. Carlo Porta, ill. Mario Marioni (Lugano: Giulio Topi, 1965).

48 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Louis Biancolli, ill. Harry Bennett (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966). For an internet copy of the illustration, see <<https://piercespicturepalace.blogspot.com/2018/03/dantes-divine-comedy-1966.html>>, last accessed December 18, 2025.

49 Quinto Martini, *L'“Inferno”: trentaquattro litografie per il poema di Dante Alighieri* (Florence: P. Bigazzi, 1985). For an internet copy, see <<https://www.gonnelli.it/it/asta-0012/martini-quinto-omaggio-a-dante-34-litografie-.asp>>, last accessed December 18, 2025. For an overview of all of Martini's artistic responses to the *Commedia*, including these lithographs, see *Omaggio a Dante: bassorilievi, pitture, disegni, litografie*, ed. Luciano Martini and Teresa Bigazzi (Florence: Aión, 2006), which is a catalog for a traveling exhibition that debuted at Poggio a Caiano's Scuderie in February 2004. For a review and framing of that work in a related exhibition, see the anonymous February 17, 2008 review in *Exibart* for “Quinto Martini – *La Divina Commedia*. Bassorilievi, disegni, litografie,” at <<https://www.exibart.com/evento-arte/quinto-martini-la-divina-commedia-bassorilievi-disegni-litografie/>>, last accessed July 24, 2025.

50 For myriad such examples in one convenient location, see the official website for an exhibition held March 22 to April 28, 2024, at MAXXI: Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Via Guido Reni 4, Rome, “Artificial Hell: Dante's Inferno seen by Artificial Intelligence,” at <<https://www.dreamstime.com/main-entrance-gates-hell-style-v-job-id-d-efd-b-ba-e-bb-image298596701>>, last accessed July 24, 2025.

51 See, for example, the gates at <<https://www.deviantart.com/tximorin/art/Dante-s-Inferno-Gates-of-Hell-202842846>>, and <<https://pixels.com/featured/at-the-gates-of-hell-11-am-fineartprints.html>>, both last accessed July 24, 2025.

illuminators, they also do nothing with image or text to promote that specific response. As my survey several years ago suggested from a much smaller and less diverse sampling, they never go beyond a broad, religiously generic or even neutral implication that, especially in the light of their often highly theatrical lighting, color, compositions, and viewpoint, seems more about instilling a frisson of horror than devotion.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, the overall conclusion of that survey would seem to be correct. Even if we restrict ourselves to publicly circulated responses to the *Commedia*, we can hardly hope to find certainty as to how all illustrators have interpreted the relevance of Dante's hell to the viewer, especially with the recent proliferation of such images amid the exponential growth of the internet and AI, but, as I hope this essay has demonstrated, a vastly expanded survey supports my thesis several years ago that post-fourteenth-century writers and illustrators have generally treated the *Commedia* as a secular text. Though they may have respected Dante's religious learning and beliefs, they have not framed them as unique messaging directly from God, much less as the product of a divinely bestowed journey into the afterlife. As so often with medievalism, these artists and authors have refracted a medieval source through a prism of very different experiences, values, and beliefs than those of its maker and have thereby refashioned it into a touchstone of, above all, themselves and their times.

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Figure 3. Federico Zuccaro, Dante and Virgil Exiting the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1586-1588.

BLOG. IL GIORNALE IT, Jan 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. *Federico Zuccaro, Dante and Virgil Exiting the Gate of Hell, "Inferno" 3, 1586-1588* [viewed 13 December 2025]. Available from: <<https://blog.ilgiornale.it/franza/2021/01/12/i-disegni-di-federico-zuccari-pittore-cinquecentesco-88-supercapolavori-che-illustrano-la-divina-commedia-in-mostra-alle-gallerie-degli-uffizi-a-firenze-per-il-settecentenario-della-morte-di-dant/>>.

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A...KADEMIE DER BILDENDEN KÜNSTE WIEN, undated. *Joseph Anton Koch, Virgil and Dante Enter the Gate of Hell, Inferno 3, c.1803* [viewed 13 December 2025]. Available from: <<https://www.akbild.ac.at/de/museum-und>>.

<sup>52</sup> Fugelso, "Inferno 3: Gateway Across the Centuries," 53-54.

ausstellungen/kunstsammlungen/aktuelles/kupferstichkabinett/vortrage-events/2019/lange-nacht-der-museen-hoellenzeichnungen-19/leadimage/view?set\_language=de >.

Figure 6: Domenico Fabris, The Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, c. 1840. Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, 3 vols., ed. Giovanni Battista Niccolini, ill. Domenico Fabris (Florence: Artistico tipografico Fabris, 1840-42).

Figure 7. Tancredi Scarpelli, Dante and Virgil Enter the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1907. Dante Alighieri, *La divina commedia*, trans. into prose by Manfredo Manfredini, ill. Tancredi Scarpelli and Manfredo Manfredini (Florence: Nerbini, 1907).

Figure 8. F. M. Roganeau, Virgil and Dante in Front of the Gate of Hell, *Inferno* 3, 1912.

Dante Alighieri, *“La divine comédie”: vingt-quatre planches hors texte en couleurs*, ed. Teodor de Wyzewa, ill. F. M. Roganeau (Paris: H. Laurens, 1912).

Professor Karl Fugelso  
Towson University  
Dept. of Art + Design, Art History, Art Education  
3103 Center for the Arts  
8000 York Rd.  
Towson, MD 21252-0001  
USA  
kfugelso@towson.edu

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