Beyond Dante:
The Figural Embodiment of a Fascist Ethos in Amos Nattini's Lucifer

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Amos Nattini's *Imagini dantesche* project, a set of 100 watercolour illustrations to the *Divine Comedy* completed mainly between 1919 and 1939, was co-opted by Fascism and co-implicated in its cultural imperialist discourse. The study fills a void in the scholarship on the subject by directly questioning the lack of critical engagement with the historical and political context of Nattini's Dante paintings. My reading hinges on an in-depth analysis of the Lucifer in the illustration to *Inferno* XXXIV. I argue that, while he continues to work closely with the text in this image as in his other illustrations, Nattini ultimately reinterprets Dante's Lucifer beyond recognition, and that this reinterpretation of the medieval poem affords a highly significant lens to reflect on Fascist cultural politics, ethos, and morality.

The first chapter introduces the reader to Nattini and his *Imagini dantesche*. The second chapter establishes Nattini's principal stylistic approach to representing scenes from the *Divine Comedy* and questions the importance accorded to the artist's alleged 'fidelity' to the poem throughout the work's reception history. The third chapter examines the reception of the *Imagini* during the Fascist *ventennio* and contextualizes it within Fascist cultural policy and imperialist aspirations. The fourth chapter then turns to Nattini's Lucifer specifically to demonstrate, through a comparative analysis inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the "imagetext," that Nattini interprets the symbolism of Dante's poem to the point of distortion in a way that suggests the impact of a Fascist ethos on his visual choices.

Ultimately, this study reveals that previous scholarly treatments of Nattini and his *Imagini* have unnecessarily flattened Nattini's Dante illustrations by over-emphasizing their perceived literal fidelity to Dante's poem and effacing their socio-political context as Fascist cultural products which were appropriated by the regime, like many other artistic endeavours of the period, for the purpose of increasing Fascist Italy's presence and influence abroad. Re-situating the illustrations within that context enables a more nuanced and insightful discussion of what is represented within them. In the case of the Lucifer, this recontextualization reveals a poignant commentary on the essential contradictoriness of Italian Fascism.

Abrégé

Ce mémoire étudie comment le projet d'illustrations de la *Comédie divine* d'Amos Nattini, une série de 100 aquarelles intitulée *Imagini dantesche* complétée principalement entre 1919 et 1939, fût assimilé par le fascisme et co-impliqué dans son discours d'impérialisme culturel. Mon étude vient combler une lacune dans la littérature à ce sujet en questionnant ouvertement le manque d'engagement critique avec le contexte politico-historique de l'œuvre dantesque de Nattini. Ma lecture de l'œuvre dépend d'une analyse approfondie de la figure de Lucifer dans l'illustration du chant XXXIV de l'*Enfer*. Je soutiens que, malgré qu'il continue de travailler avec le poème de Dante en tête dans cette illustration comme dans celles qui la précèdent, Nattini réinterprète le Lucifer dantesque au point de le rendre méconnaissable. Cette réinterprétation du poème médiéval nous offre une optique importante nous permettant de réfléchir sur la politique culturelle du fascisme ainsi que sur son ethos et sa moralité.

Le premier chapitre présente Nattini et ses *Imagini dantesche*. Le deuxième chapitre définit l'approche stylistique généralement adoptée par Nattini pour représenter visuellement les divers épisodes de la *Comédie divine* et remet en question l'importance accordée à la supposée « fidélité » textuelle du peintre au poème, acclamée dans la réception critique de l'œuvre. Le troisième chapitre examine la réception des *Imagini* durant le *ventennio* fasciste dans le contexte de la politique culturelle et des aspirations impérialistes fascistes. Le quatrième chapitre s'occupe en fin du Lucifer de Nattini pour démontrer, par le biais d'une analyse comparative inspirée du concept de « l'imagetexte » de W.J.T. Mitchell, que Nattini interprète le symbolisme de Dante de manière à le déformer, ce qui suggère une influence fasciste sur ses choix esthétiques.

Finalement, ce mémoire démontre que l'érudition précédente sur le sujet de Nattini et de ses *Imagini* a inutilement aplati les illustrations dantesques de l'artiste en mettant trop l'accent sur leur supposée fidélité à la *Comédie divine* et en effaçant leur contexte socio-politique en tant que produits culturels fascistes qui ont été appropriés par le régime, comme le furent de nombreux autres projets artistiques de l'époque, dans le but d'accroître la popularité et l'influence de l'Italie fasciste à l'étranger. Resituer ces illustrations dans leur contexte politico-historique permet le développement d'une discussion plus perspicace et nuancée de ce qui s'y trouve représenté. Dans le cas de la figure de Lucifer, cette mise en contexte révèle un commentaire poignant sur la nature essentiellement contradictoire du fascisme italien.

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[1] NB: M = McGill University copy of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia*; P = Princeton University copy of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia*.

Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks go out first and foremost to my wonderful supervisor, Professor Giuliana Minghelli, without whose gentle guidance, unwavering encouragement, and thoughtful feedback this thesis would not have gotten very far. Thank you also to Professor Lucienne Kroha, who regularly checked in on my progress and helped me navigate the dark wood that grad school sometimes feels like, Ann Marie Holland, whose expertise and patience were invaluable when searching for sources in McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections, and Alexandra Kohn, for helping to demystify how to acquire copyright permissions for the visual materials included in this thesis.

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Thanks are due as well to McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections for allowing me to monopolize the Lande office during a few weeks in the summer of 2018 when I was working with their copy of Amos Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* and for permitting me to take photographs for research purposes as well as professionally digitizing a few plates from the *Inferno* volume; I am grateful also to the Princeton University Library for making their fully digitized copy of Nattini's *Commedia* easily accessible online. McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections Library further allowed me to consult and photograph the Sandro Botticelli illustrations to the *Commedia* as reproduced in Carl Weber's limited edition of the poem produced in the 1920s, for which I thank them again.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on a cycle of illustrations of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* that were realized by Genoese painter Amos Nattini (1892-1985) primarily between 1919 and 1939, under the patronage of Fascist party member Rino Valdameri (1889-1943) and with the direct public endorsement, as of circa 1930, of Benito Mussolini. Specifically, it takes Nattini's representation of Lucifer in the illustration to *Inferno* XXXIV as a case study through which to shed light on the ethics and cultural politics of Fascist Italy.

While it is little known today, Nattini's illustrated, limited edition of the *Commedia*, in which his large-scale watercolour paintings were reproduced by means of colour lithography, was arguably one of the highest-profile artistic endeavours of the Fascist *ventennio*, drawing the attention and public praise of many, including the highest-ranking members of Italian society at the time: Pope Pius XI, King Vittorio Emanuele III, and Mussolini. Nattini's *Imagini dantesche*, as the artist titled his illustrations, were appropriated and reframed by Mussolini's regime for the purpose of increasing Fascist Italy's presence and influence abroad through cultural imperialism. Since the end of the Second World War, Nattini's presence on the art scene has dramatically faded, but his *Imagini* continue to inspire awe in those who see and write about them, if not much critical engagement. This thesis thus seeks to remedy an important gap in scholarship by resituating the *Imagini* in their socio-historical and political context in order to reflect on the role of art in shaping Italian Fascism's image of itself.

There is in fact little scholarship on Nattini and his *Imagini*, let alone his Lucifer specifically, most of which fails to go beyond a surface-level comparison of the illustrations and the poem they accompany. There are, granted, a few books I was unable to consult as part of my research for this thesis, namely *Amos Nattini: Maestro del segno* by Vitaliano Rocchiero (1972) and *Amos Nattini: imagini della Divina Commedia 1919-1939* edited by Rossana Bossaglia, Maurizia Bonatti Bacchini, and Valerio Terraroli (1994).[2] In general, however, the relevant scholarship focuses almost exclusively on Nattini's perceived 'perfect' fidelity to the text of the *Commedia* in his illustrations (Barricelli 1986, 1992, 1996; Gizzi 1998c; Depalmi 2007; Cassinari 2012), neglecting to consider the larger context that informs the relations between the

[2] This was primarily due to travel, inter-library loan, and institutional library reading room access restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Imagini and the *Commedia* and apparently blind to how the Lucifer in Nattini's *Inferno* XXXIV nullifies the claim that Nattini is always literally faithful to the text of the poem. Moreover, and most importantly for my analysis of the Lucifer and the *Imagini* as a whole, no critical study has yet engaged in a sustained way with the cultural and political role that Nattini's project played within Fascist Italy.

W.J.T. Mitchell, in his 1994 *Picture Theory*, refers to the type of comparison characteristic of previous *Imagini* scholarship as a 'trap,' warning his readers that

> comparison itself is not a necessary procedure in the study of image-text relations. The necessary subject matter is, rather, the whole ensemble of relations between media, and relations can be many things besides similarity, resemblance, and analogy. Difference is just as important as similarity, antagonism as crucial as collaboration, dissonance and division of labor as interesting as harmony and blending of function (89-90).

Mitchell goes on to argue that the "best preventive to comparative methods is an insistence on literalness and materiality" (90), which is to say dispensing with any presuppositions we may have about what defines image-text relations in theory so that we may see the actual relations at work between a specific text and a specific image in practice. Since these relations are always context-specific, the starting point for analysis should be "with language's entry into (or exit from) the pictorial field itself, a field understood as a complex medium that is *always already mixed and heterogeneous, situated within institutions, histories, and discourses*: the image understood, in short, as an imagetext" (98; my emphasis).

In my own approach to the *Imagini*, I have thus sought to treat Nattini's illustrations as 'imagetexts' in the way Mitchell describes, comparing them to the *Commedia* that they were intended to accompany in the process but above all grounding my study in the socio-historical and political contexts within which they were produced. Nattini's *Imagini dantesche*, after all, are a product of the interwar period in the first half of the twentieth century, a full six centuries after the poem they illustrate was written. During those six hundred years, the *Commedia* underwent countless interpretations, reinterpretations, translations, and adaptations in a plethora of media, all of which helped shape its reception at various times and all of which bear the traces of the specific moment and place of their production. Nattini's *Imagini* are no different: they too are circumscribed by and interwoven with their time and place of creation. In the case of the Lucifer specifically, as for most of the other illustrations in Nattini's *Commedia* cycle, that time

and place is Fascist Italy; my thesis thus explores how the Fascist Italian context conditioned and informed the relations between the *Commedia* and the *Imagini* as observable in the imagetext that is Nattini's *Inferno* XXXIV illustration.

In the pages that follow, I contend that Nattini, in his visual adaptation of Dante's Lucifer, reinterprets the figure to the point of distortion, going further than most other *Commedia* illustrators in producing a painting of *Inferno* XXXIV that completely rewrites the atmosphere of the canto and corresponding symbolism of the figure. I argue that this reinterpretation is deeply embedded in the illustration's Fascist context of production, as evidenced by the similarities between the retooled *Commedia* symbolism in Nattini's modernized Lucifer and that found in other like cultural endeavours of the *ventennio* such as Giuseppe Terragni's and Pietro Lingeri's Danteum, and that Nattini demonstrates his complicity in the Fascist appropriation of his *Imagini* through his aesthetic choices in designing his Lucifer. I further argue that Nattini's Lucifer embodies a distinctly Fascist ethos and that this affords us a highly significant lens through which to reflect on Fascist cultural politics and morality.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. The first, "Artist and Artifact in Context," introduces the reader to Nattini and his *Imagini dantesche* in greater detail. It begins with a brief biography of the artist, followed by an overview of the development of the *Imagini* project from conception to completion and a detailed description of the monumental finished edition that was the project's end goal from its beginning. The second chapter, "The *Commedia* Cycle," establishes Nattini's principal stylistic approach to representing scenes from Dante's Christian epic and questions the importance accorded to the artist's alleged 'fidelity' to the poem throughout the work's reception history. It first describes Nattini's overall style as observable in the majority of his Dante illustrations, then highlights which aspects of this style make Nattini stand out amongst *Commedia* illustrators and argues that while Nattini's general fidelity to Dante's verse is remarkable, contrary to what most previous scholars have claimed this fidelity is neither perfect nor the most salient feature of the *Imagini*.

The third chapter, "Exhibition, Reception, Appropriation," next examines the reception of the *Imagini* during the Fascist *ventennio* and contextualizes it within Fascist cultural policy and imperialist aspirations. It begins with an overview of the in-progress exhibitions of Nattini's *Imagini* that peppered the 1920s and '30s, taking a closer look at how the praise these received, as exemplified in Fascist member of parliament Mattia Limoncelli's speech given at the 1927

partial exhibition of Nattini's *Inferno* in Naples, framed Nattini's Dante illustrations within a larger project of Fascist cultural imperialism; it then considers how Fascism approached cultural imperialism and how it appropriated the works of Italian cultural icons like Dante — as well as the modern projects meant to celebrate them — in order to celebrate itself. The chapter then closes with a reading of the never-built Danteum's projected itinerary as a case study in which Fascist cultural imperialism and the 'Fascistization' of Dante and his *Commedia* work in tandem, affording a unique view of the essential contradictoriness that drives Fascist myth-making and muddles its ethical universe.

Finally, the fourth chapter, "Representing Lucifer," turns to Nattini's *Inferno* XXXIV directly to demonstrate that the painter interprets the symbolism of the *Commedia* to the point of distortion in a way that suggests the impact of a Fascist ethos on his visual choices. The chapter begins with a comparative close-reading of Dante's verse portrait of Lucifer and Nattini's watercolour counterpart, then broadens the comparison to consider the visual interpretations of other artists to argue that Nattini's modernized Lucifer stands out for its unprecedented reversal of the mood of Dante's canto. It then situates Nattini's Lucifer within the tradition of representation of the Devil in the arts and draws on the contexts discussed in previous chapters to propose a socio-political interpretation of the figure as an ethical manifesto of Fascism.

Ultimately, this study reveals that previous scholarly treatments of Nattini and his *Imagini* have unnecessarily flattened Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations by over-emphasizing their perceived literal fidelity to Dante's poem and effacing their socio-political context as Fascist cultural products which, like many other artistic endeavours of the period, were appropriated by the regime for the purpose of increasing Fascist Italy's presence and influence abroad. Resituating the illustrations within that context enables a more nuanced and insightful discussion of what is represented within them. As Mitchell convincingly observes, there is "no compulsion (though there may be occasions) to compare paintings with texts, *even if* the text happens to be represented directly (or indirectly) in the painting. The starting point is to see what particular form of textuality is elicited (*or repressed*) by the painting *and in the name of what values*" (Mitchell 1994, 97; my emphasis). In the case of Nattini's Lucifer, I contend that this textuality is a distortive reinterpretation of *Inferno* XXXIV that twists Dante's message beyond recognition, seemingly in accordance with Fascist values and in a way that appears to comment on the role of art in shaping Fascist Italy.

Chapter 1: Artist and Artifact in Context

This chapter seeks to outline some background information on Amos Nattini and his *Imagini dantesche* project. It has three main focal points: identifying key moments in Nattini's life and career pre- and post-*Commedia* illustrations; establishing as accurately as possible a timeline of Nattini's work on the *Imagini dantesche* project, from initial conception to final result; and providing a detailed description of that final result, of which Nattini's illustrations are only one part — albeit a very important one — of a larger whole. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to situate the *Imagini dantesche* project within the context of Nattini's life and works as well as to describe the material context in which Nattini's Dante illustrations are, and were always meant to be, ensconced. These considerations will then serve as a stepping-stone to the analysis and interpretation of Nattini's *Imagini dantesche* in later chapters.

1.1. A Brief Biography[3]

Amos Nattini was born in Genoa on March 16, 1892, to Emanuele Nattini (d. Oppiano, July 22, 1903) and Ernestina Patrioli (d. Oppiano, 1953). He married Maria Elena Bracci on October 1, 1917, and died on October 3, 1985, at the Stuart Hospital in Parma at the venerable age of ninety-three, allegedly still painting well into his last years.

Following his mother's wishes, in 1910 Nattini enrolled at the Istituto Tecnico Vittorio Emanuele II to become an accountant, but quickly abandoned these studies in favour of pursuing his passion for art and continuing with self-directed literary studies.[4] He signed up for evening classes in figure drawing at the Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti instead, but soon abandoned these as well, preferring to sit in on Pilade Lachi's anatomy lessons at the University of Genoa (which he did for four years) and to sketch life in motion at the Genoese port.

In February 1912, Nattini presented what would become part of his first notable work as an artist to Francesco Maria Zandrino, secretary of the Associazione dei Giornalisti Liguri: an illustration to Gabriele D'Annunzio's *La canzone del Sacramento*, one of the ten *Canzoni delle*

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[3] This section is based on the corroborated accounts of the following sources, listed in order of completeness and credibility: Gizzi 1998a and 1998c, Cassinari 2012, Depalmi 2007, Emelianova 2015a, Pallottino 1998, Civello 1998, Gallarati Scotti 1922, Pellegri 1979, and Isman 2015. Only in cases of direct quotation will a parenthetical in-text citation be provided.

[4] Nattini allegedly left the Istituto Tecnico after receiving a failing grade in technical drawing (Gizzi 1998a, 27).

gesta d'oltremare that the poet was in the process of composing and publishing in the *Corriere della sera*. Favourably impressed, Zandrino urged Nattini to illustrate the other *canzoni* and sent a copy of the first drawing to D'Annunzio who, equally pleased with the young man's work, in his response to Zandrino's letter dated March 26 suggested printing a special edition of the *Canzoni delle gesta d'oltremare* featuring Nattini's illustrations. By the end of June, Nattini had illustrated seven of the ten *canzoni* and Zandrino orchestrated the publication of a luxurious limited edition of the poems (print run of only 101 copies, completed on July 9) with the financial support of the Consorzio Autonomo del Porto di Genova. The original drawings, placed alongside D'Annunzio's manuscript poems in a glass case decorated with painted miniatures by Aurelio Craffonara[5] and Federico Maragliano, were exhibited first to journalists in a vernissage-style event on June 22 in the Salone delle Compere of the Palazzo di San Giorgio, and then to the general public on June 28 following a solemn ceremony during which D'Annunzio gifted his *Canzone del Sangue* to the Consorzio Autonomo del Porto di Genova.

This first exhibition and publication brought Nattini his first success as an artist. Not only was the public captivated by his illustrations at the exhibition itself, but the following day four of the images were reproduced in the well-read magazine *L'Illustrazione Italiana*[6] and journalists and art critics both in Italy and abroad had much praise to bestow: Nattini's illustrated D'Annunzio featured in laudatory articles in London's *The Graphic* and Paris's *Illustration*, and even in the *Encyclopédie Larousse*. Amongst Italian critics, Ugo Ojetti, who would prove to be Nattini's first and most vocal supporter, observed that the composition of the *Canzoni* illustrations "è davvero bella, originale, equilibrata e che un giovane sappia inventare, disegnare e comporre così è una gioia per tutti" (qtd. in Pellegri 1979, 136).

The most important outcome of this initial success, however, was D'Annunzio's patronage. Nattini developed a close relationship with D'Annunzio, becoming one of his preferred protégés. It was in fact D'Annunzio, along with Zandrino, who first encouraged Nattini to pursue his *Imagini dantesche* project. After their collaboration on the special edition of the *Canzoni della gesta d'oltremare*, D'Annunzio invited Nattini to join him in Paris where he

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[5] Gizzi (1998a) identifies this artist as "Graffonara," but according to the entry on the painter in volume 30 of the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1984; entry written by Paola Pallottino and Franco Sborgi) that is a common misspelling (see http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/aurelio-craffonara_(Dizionario-Biografico)/), which I have opted to correct here.

[6] According to the Wikipedia article, it was one of the three most-read weekly publications in Italy from the late nineteenth century until the advent of television (see https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Illustrazione_Italiana).

introduced the young artist to the French capital's aristocratic artistic and cultural salons. Nattini accepted the invitation and made his way to Paris in January 1913, remaining there under D'Annunzio's wing until his return to Genoa at the end of June 1914. Once back in his native city, Nattini joined Zandrino's Compagnia del Bivacco, an association of young artists and writers who often collaborated with each other on visual-textual projects, all of whose members were in close acquaintance with and greatly influenced by D'Annunzio.[7]

On May 5, 1915, within a fortnight of Italy's decision to join World War I, Nattini met D'Annunzio again for a brief visit at the Hotel du Parc in Genoa, later standing in the crowd gathered in Quarto dei Mille to hear D'Annunzio's "Sagra dei Mille," a speech celebrating the nation's decision to take part in the global conflict. Twenty-three years old at the time, it seems likely that Nattini would have been drafted to aid the war effort at some point between 1915 and 1918, but in what capacity is unclear.[8] In 1917, he was commissioned along with Enzo Bifoli to decorate the Ponte Monumentale and the Palazzo del Credito Italiano di Genova with mobile panels to underline the bank's contribution to the war effort through a public loan. Nattini and Bifoli produced four large allegorical paintings for the occasion, entitled *Dare con forza*, *Dare con gioia*, *Dare con fede*, and *Dare con sacrificio*.

Nattini would see D'Annunzio with increasing rarity as the years went by, the poet becoming ever more reclusive in his Vittoriale residence in Gardone. One of the last times the young artist saw D'Annunzio was in late March of 1921, when he paid a visit to the Vittoriale and received a copy of the poet's Fiume cemetery speech, "Al rito dei caduti," bearing the dedication, "Ad Amos Nattini Pittore degli Spiriti. Pasqua di Resurrezione 1921." Following this visit, Nattini would seek to contact D'Annunzio, as did many of his other protégés, to no avail, although he would return at least once more to the Vittoriale, in 1938, when he sketched the poet on his deathbed.

In 1924, Nattini moved from Genoa to Milan, where he stayed in a house made available to him by Rino Valdameri, the patron who would finance most of the *Commedia* illustration

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[7] Other members of this elite group included Enzo Bifoli (painter and architect), Arrigo Minerbi (sculptor), and Rodolfo Fumagalli (writer), with whom Nattini either worked on joint projects or developed lasting friendships. Nattini, for instance, illustrated Fumagalli's *Le pupille nell'ombra* in 1914 and became close friends Arrigo Minerbi, even having an oft-reproduced photo-portrait taken of himself in front of one of the sculptor's statues; a letter from the sculptor to the painter, dated February 3, 1923, suggests that Minerbi was also one of the subscribers of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia*.

[8] See Gizzi 1998a, 37: "Come altri giovani, anche Nattini prestò servizio militare." Gizzi, however, does not provide any further detail, nor have my other sources commented on this.

project. From 1924 to 1940-1941,[9] Nattini split his time between Milan and Oppiano (near Parma), where he owned an ex-Benedictine monastery inherited from his maternal grandfather; during this time, he seems to have been primarily focused on his *Imagini dantesche*, although he may have received and accepted commissions from wealthy industrialists as well. In Milan in the 1930s, Nattini notably frequented the salon of Guido Uccelli di Nemi, engineer and proprietor of the Officine Riva Calzoni, along with his friend Arrigo Minerbi. Nattini would later produce two paintings for Uccelli's Officine Riva, *La bonifica idraulica* (1942) and *L'energia idroelettrica* (1943), and commissions of this kind constitute a sizeable portion of Nattini's post-*Commedia* oeuvre.

By 1941, Italy having joined World War II as part of the Axis powers in June of 1940, Nattini made the ex-monastery in Oppiano his permanent and final abode. The information about Nattini's life there during and immediately after the war is scant and foggy. One source, a short article by Fabio Isman, reports that Nattini abetted the *partigiani* and aided British soldiers as they escaped from a prisoner-of-war camp in Fontanellato (about twenty-five kilometres away from Oppiano) (Isman 2015, 38). This source also claims that Nattini was arrested and subsequently released by the Gestapo, although on what charges is unclear; another source suggests that Nattini's arrest was related to the aid he provided the British escapees and to an accusation of listening to Radio London (Mazzarelli 2015b, 37), but neither source provides sufficient documentation to substantiate these claims. Isman further reports that following the liberation of Italy from Nazi occupation in 1945, Nattini was elected as the first mayor of Collecchio, holding the position for a brief six months, and later became a socialist municipal councillor (tenure unspecified). Isman, however, is the only source to mention Nattini's post-war political career, which suggests that it was either short-lived or not particularly eventful; other sources tend to focus exclusively on Nattini's post-war painterly endeavours.

Most critics and scholars characterize the years in Oppiano as quiet, with Nattini deliberately removing himself from the limelight that enveloped him for the decades he spent illustrating Dante in favour of solitude in the Apennines, away from the clamour and glamour of the art scene of which he had long been a 'protagonist,' as Marco Pellegri puts it.[10] Uninclined to

[9] Sources vary between 1940 and 1941 as the year in which Nattini makes Oppiano his sole residence, leaving Milan behind.

[10] According to Renato Civello, Nattini may have considered suicide at some point during his residency in Oppiano, but never attempted it (Civello 1998, 65); Civello, however, does not specify when or for what motive specifically,

follow the artistic trends of the post-war, Nattini continued to paint in his preferred realist style and thus fell from favour amongst leading critics who considered him outmoded. This does not seem to have particularly bothered Nattini, however, who painted prolifically until his death and remained a local celebrity in Parma, where even well into the 1980s "si continua a ricordare la sua vicinanza al Vate Gabriele d'Annunzio [*sic*] durante gli eroici anni giovanili e a celebrarne l'instancabile operosità" (Cassinari 2012, 239).

1.2. A Production History of the Imagini dantesche[11]

Nattini's most acknowledged work, and arguably the most representative of an 'instancabile operosità,' remains his illustrated *Commedia*. As can be gathered from an article that appeared in *Il Secolo Illustrato* in 1922, Nattini had an extraordinarily ambitious (and mathematically impossible) timeline in mind for the completion of his illustration cycle: three years to complete one hundred illustrations at a pace of twenty to twenty-five illustrations per annum. In actuality, he spent more than twenty years on his *Imagini dantesche*,[12] working contemporaneously on both the illustrations and the large-scale luxury edition in which they would feature, which was conceived as the end goal of the project from its very beginnings.

The idea to illustrate the *Commedia* appears to have originated with Zandrino, who at the end of June 1912 prompted the then twenty-year-old artist to surpass himself as an illustrator of D'Annunzio by becoming an illustrator of Dante, in time for the six hundredth anniversary of the poet's death in 1921. By 1913, Nattini presented a trial of three watercolour paintings — illustrations to *Inferno* XII, *Purgatorio* XXVII, and *Paradiso* XXXIII — to Zandrino, who showed them to D'Annunzio and to Félix Fournery, both of whom were favourably impressed; the latter in fact praised Nattini so highly to Édouard Devambez that the illustrious French printer and engraver promised Nattini much work in Paris, should the young man come to work there (which he did). Nattini presented these same three illustrations at the Permanente di Milano

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referring only to the artist's letters in a passing, parenthetical allusion (". . . Nattini invece sfiorerà la crisi, ma non giungerà mai al parossismo. Ci illumina l'epistolario e il fatto stesso di essersi rifugiato nella pace eremitale dell'ex convento di Oppiano.").

[11] The following section is based on the corroborated accounts of: Gizzi 1998a, 1998b, and 1998c; Depalmi 2007; Cassinari 2012; Pellegri 1979; Emelianova 2015b and 2015c; Civello 1998; Mazzarelli 2015b; and Isman 2015. Only in cases of direct quotation or conflict between sources will a parenthetical reference be provided beyond this footnote.

[12] Most sources will specify that Nattini spent twenty years, or "twenty years and seven months" (quoting the artist himself) on this illustration project; however, if one considers the project from its very beginnings to its completed editorial run, it looks more like over thirty years, from 1912 to 1945.

in 1915, where they were also well received. The combination of the praise from mentors and the modest success of the 1915 exhibition convinced Nattini to commit himself to producing a full cycle of *Commedia* illustrations, a project he would approach with much rigour and studiousness: "Consulta incunaboli, codici danteschi e testi esegetici; compulsa trattati d'assirologia ed egittologia; studia testi di filosofia e poesia orientali per interpretare il mondo dantesco" (Gizzi 1998a, 40).

After a brief hiatus (likely due at least in part to WWI), in 1919 Nattini began working on his *Imagini dantesche* anew, most likely painting his illustrations, one for each canto (with the exception of *Inf*. XI and XVIII, which have none and two respectively),[13] in textual order, from *Inf*. I to *Par*. XXXII (*Par*. XXXIII having been completed by 1913, along with *Inf*. XII and *Purg*. XXVII). In 1920, Nattini co-founded the Casa Editrice di Dante (based in Genoa) with Rino Valdameri for the sole purpose of producing a monumental illustrated edition of the *Commedia*; at an unspecified date, though likely sometime between 1922 and 1924, the Casa Editrice di Dante moved its offices to Milan and was renamed Istituto Nazionale Dantesco, owing to "non poche difficoltà, di carattere prevalentemente tecnico" (Gizzi 1998b, 116).[14] Valdameri, Nattini's patron from 1920 until the early 1940s, funded the project, whilst Nattini was responsible for everything related to design and production.

Valdameri and Nattini established a bespoke production model for their projected 1000-copy print run of a lavish, three-volume illustrated edition of the *Commedia*, conceived from the outset as a monument to Dante.[15] Available for purchase only to those who pre-ordered a copy, the edition was distributed canto by canto to buyers who would pay by instalment for each one upon reception of it, at a pace of approximately six cantos per year. Designs for special lecterns to house and display the volumes were commissioned as early as 1921; these were made available for purchase, at an additional cost, to those who had reserved a copy of the edition. Quoting the subscription contract for copy 579 of the edition (dated November 13, 1928),

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[13] Most critics and scholars seem to agree on the hypothesis that Nattini did not illustrate *Inf*. XI because it consists of an explanation of the structure of Dante's hell rather than any significant encounters; the artist would have compensated for this unillustrated canto by producing two illustrations for *Inf*. XVIII, in which the pilgrim and his guide traverse two *bolge* of the circle of fraud.

[14] Gizzi does not specify when this change occurred (or what exactly is meant by 'technical difficulties'), but it seems logical that the move from Genoa to Milan and change of name of the *Casa Editrice Dante* to *Istituto Nazionale Dantesco* would have preceded Nattini's own move to the Lombard capital in 1924.

[15] Depalmi, basing herself on an article that Nattini either wrote or was quoted in, notes an even more ambitious plan for a 1500- to 2000-copy print run (Depalmi 2007, 29).

Cassinari notes that the instalment due upon reception of each canto and the bindings of each canticle was of 225 *lire*, with the lectern available for an additional 1250 *lire* (Cassinari 2012, 241); the total cost today, in Canadian dollars, would come out to over $20,000.[16]

By February 1923, the first fully printed illustrated canto (likely *Inf.* I) was distributed to subscribers. The *Inferno* cycle would be completed seven years later, in 1930, and the edited volume of this first canticle fully published in 1931. Illustrating *Purgatorio* would occupy Nattini for an additional six years, from 1931 to 1936, with the printed volume completed by October 28, 1936, as per its colophon. Comparatively to those accompanying the other two canticles, the *Paradiso* cycle would be completed in a significantly shorter time span, from 1937 to early December 1939, although details surrounding the completion of the printed volume paint a confused picture of an editorial process undoubtedly made more complicated by the outbreak of WWII. Corrado Gizzi, for instance, notes that the third canticle was published and finished printing on October 28, 1941, and he reproduces the colophon of the *Paradiso* volume as supporting documentation (Gizzi 1998b, 116); Renato Civello, however, in his chapter appearing alongside Gizzi's in *Amos Nattini e Dante*, claims that Nattini only finished printing *Paradiso* after 1945 (Civello 1998, 63). Carla Mazzarelli, for her part, in the accompanying booklet to the Ascona Municipal Museum of Modern Art's 2015 exhibition entitled "Amos Nattini e la *Divina Commedia* figurata tra le due guerre: Arte, architettura e lettere in dialogo," states that the publication of the full print run of *Paradiso* was never completed (Mazzarelli 2015b, 37).

Based on the unbound and incomplete state of McGill University's copy of the *Paradiso* volume, I am inclined to agree with those who claim that the print run for the third canticle was never completed — or, at the very least, that the editorial project remains unfinished — for three compelling reasons. Firstly, from a logistical perspective, as Cinzia Cassinari notes, acquiring the materials needed for the printing and binding of a luxurious illustrated edition such as Nattini's *Commedia* would have become more difficult with the outbreak of war in light of a

[16] This is an approximation based on the results obtained via "Historical Currency Converter," a tool developed by Professor Rodney Evinsson of the University of Stockholm and available online at https://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html (last updated on January 10, 2016). The tool allowed me to convert the value of 24 425 *lire* in 1928 (225 *lire* multiplied by 100 cantos and three bindings added to the registered cost of the lectern) to their equivalent in Canadian dollars in 2015 (the most recent year for which the tool has data). The result of the conversion, if one rounds up to the nearest dollar, comes to a value of 20 458 Canadian dollars. Regrettably, I have not found a tool that allows me to convert that amount to Canadian dollars in 2021, but based on these approximate calculations it is safe to assume that the full edition and accompanying lectern if sold today (i.e., if Nattini was working on the project today — I could imagine an auction value to be very different) would cost at least $20 000 CAD, and likely more.

corresponding shift in priorities for the allocation of resources in a war economy (Cassinari 2012, 242). Secondly, and more specifically to the *Imagini dantesche* project, although the colophon Gizzi reproduces still specifies that the *Paradiso* volume was printed "a istanza di Rino Valdameri," Mazzarelli notes that around the late 1930s or early '40s Nattini had a falling out with his financier, who subsequently ceased to fund him; this too may have imposed additional strain and limitations on Nattini for the completion of the *Paradiso* volumes, especially if many of the materials still had to be purchased, as the artist sought to finish production at his own expense (Mazzarelli 2015b, 37). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the premises of the Istituto Nazionale Dantesco, including the printing shop and storage space, were grievously damaged when Milan was bombed in 1944, likely occasioning an irremediable loss (Mazzarelli 2015b, 37; Cassinari 2012, 247 n38; Civello 1998, 63; Isman 2015, 37).

1.3. A Monumental Edition[17]

The loss of much or all of what was already produced but not distributed of the *Paradiso* volume along with that of the equipment necessary to reproduce it, coupled with the loss of patron funding and, so it would seem, critical interest in Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* in the postwar, appears to have marked the abrupt end of the elaborate and once prestigious *Imagini dantesche* project. Nowadays, of the planned thousand copies of the luxurious edition, Fabio Isman estimates the extant sets to number in the tens, with the majority of the published volumes assumed lost to bombs during the Second World War (Isman 2015, 37). The volumes that remain, however, are enough to attest to the grandness of the endeavour.

Each volume of the carefully numbered[18] sets measures 82 x 67 cm,[19] weighs 27 kg, and requires a minimum of two people to set it on a special lectern or large reading table for

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[17] The following section is based on my own observations of McGill's copy of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* and on the corroborated accounts of Gizzi 1998a and 1998b, Cassinari 2012, Depalmi 2007, and Mazzarelli 2015a as well as (to a lesser degree) those of Emelianova 2015c, Delsante 1998, and Isman 2015. Parenthetical in-text citations beyond this point will be provided only for direct quotations and in cases of conflicting information. Princeton University's fully digitized copy, available online through their library catalogue, helped supplement the lacunae of the incomplete McGill copy and provided most of the images of the *Imagini dantesche* used in this thesis, for which I am grateful given the logistical difficulties of having the McGill copy digitized.

[18] Each volume of McGill's set, for instance, includes a limited-edition statement that reads "ESEMPLARE | NUMERO OTTOCENTOQUATTORDICI | PER | McGILL | University Library Montreal," thus identifying McGill's set as copy 814 of 1000.

[19] These measurements are from Gizzi 1998a (45) and 1998b (116). Cassinari 2012 records slightly smaller dimensions of 81 x 65 cm, and the McGill Library catalogue record specifies dimensions of 83 x 60 cm (https://mcgill.on.worldcat.org/oclc/427249625). The variation may be due to possible small differences in size

consultation. The paper on which the edition is printed, white for the illustrations and ivory for the text, was hand-laid, specially commissioned from the Pietro Miliani Mills of Fabriano (as the watermark attests), and made from rags. The text was printed in sepia ink via copper-plate etching, the lettering designed by Nattini himself and modelled on early Latin typesets (Gizzi 1998a, 42, and 1998b, 115; Depalmi 2007, 29; Cassinari 2012, 241). Each canto, delivered to subscribers as an individual quire, comprises three folia:[20] two containing the text of the poem, printed on the recto of the page in two columns and framed by a custom border specific to the canticle (a pattern of right triangles for *Inferno*, a slimmer version for *Purgatorio*, and stars for *Paradiso*; see figs. 1.1-3), followed by Nattini's illustration, reproduced using the then novel method of colour lithography pioneered by the Kolbe print shop in Dresden.[21] According to Gizzi, each quire was sent to subscribers in a leather covering ("copertina"), into which was

Figure 1.1: Nattini *Inferno* sample text (P)

Figure 1.2: Nattini *Purgatorio* sample text (P)

Figure 1.3: Nattini *Paradiso* sample text (P)

between each of the copies referenced, or perhaps in the part of the volume that was measured (e.g., leaves versus binding).

[20] Except, of course, *Inf.* XI (two folia of text) and XVIII (two of text, two of illustration). The intended collation of these cantos seems to have not always been respected, however, as demonstrated by the McGill copy that puts one of the canto XVIII illustrations after canto XI.

[21] To quote my sources on this matter, Nattini's illustrations were reproduced by means of the most up-to-date ("più all'avanguardia," Emelianova 2015c, 29) and innovative method of colour lithography ("procedimento di scomposizione e ricomposizione dei colori," Gizzi 1998a, 42) put into practice by the Kolbe print shop in Dresden (Gizzi 1998a, 42; Emelianova 2015c, 29), with which Nattini allegedly corresponded (Emelianova 2015c, 29). Regrettably, neither Gizzi nor Emelianova reproduces or quotes the documentary evidence (e.g. letters, in the case of Emelianova) on which they found these claims, nor have I been able to find further information on a Kolbe print shop in Dresden and what made the process of colour lithography practiced there different from that practiced elsewhere up until the late 1910s or early 1920s during which it seems most logical that Nattini would have researched his own approach to reproducing his *Imagini dantesche* in print.

worked one of Nattini's drawings, along with a 'cover page' on the verso of which was printed an engraving of a galloping horse captioned "Securi d'ogne intoppo e d'ogne sbarro" ('Safe from all delay and from all impediment,' *Purg*. XXXIII line 42) (Gizzi 1998a, 42, and 1998b, 115).

From the method of distribution of the edition to subscribers, it appears that the responsibility for binding the quires of each volume together was left to the purchaser, although the bindings themselves were provided. These, made of board covered in hand-worked leather and lined with hand-stitched silk, were in fact specially designed by Nattini to further visually narrate Dante's *Commedia* alongside his illustrations by embodying the plot, themes, and leitmotifs specific to each canticle. The binding of *Inferno*, for instance, is of a dark brown leather, symbolizing the absence of light characteristic of Dante's hell. The front cover (see fig. 1.4) features a tan leather inlay, into which is worked Nattini's drawing of the infernal abyss: coloured to hint at the pilgrim's descent into increasing darkness over the course of the canticle, the inlay sits above an inverted pyramid of nine rectangles (representing the nine circles of Dante's hell) and is framed by a triple archway (representing the three canticles), both worked into the darker leather of the main binding. The back cover (see fig. 1.5) in turn features an inlaid circle of black leather dotted with silver stars: framed by a triple circle similar to the triple

Figure 1.4: Nattini *Inferno* front cover (M)

Figure 1.5: Nattini *Inferno* back cover (M)

Figure 1.6: Nattini *Inferno* inner lining (P)

archway of the front cover, this night sky represents the pilgrim's view as he emerges from the depths of hell onto the shores of purgatory, the end point of the first leg of the pilgrim's otherworldly journey just as the front inlay shows the starting point. Inside the covers, the sapphire silk linings (see figs. 1.6-8), embroidered with gold thread, each reproduce a pattern of nine medallions — recalling again the nine circles of hell — of which four represent Lucifer's sigil (arranged in a diamond) and five read the phrase "*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni*" ('The banners of the king of hell draw near,' *Inf*. XXXIV line 1; arranged in an 'X') stitched in a circle with the last word, outlined in red thread, occupying the centre.

The bindings for the following two canticles continue to provide 'plot markers' in the form of front and back inlays: *Purgatorio* features a drawing of the angel-steered boat the pilgrim sees carrying souls to Mount Purgatory on his first morning there (front; see fig. 1.9), worked into natural leather with some gold-leaf or gold paint outlining and framed by a triple archway like the one around the front inlay of *Inferno* (the bottom is instead slightly covered by a nine-tiered mountain formed by the main leather covering), and a graphical representation of the astrological conjunction marking the date and time of the pilgrim's 'transhumanizing' ascent from the earthly paradise to heaven (back; see fig. 1.10), imprinted in gold on an eight-point star of black leather framed with a triple outline worked into the surrounding leather of the binding; *Paradiso* in turn features a representation of the holy trinity (front; see fig. 1.11) and

Figure 1.7: Nattini *Inferno* inner lining (P); detail

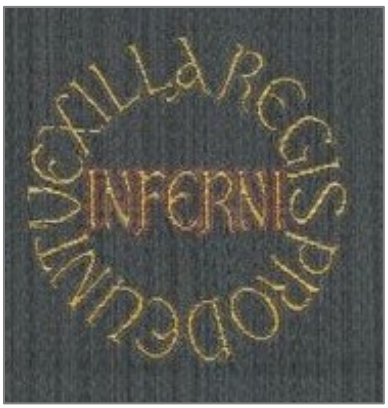

Figure 1.8: Nattini *Inferno* inner lining (P); detail

Figure 1.9: Nattini *Purgatorio* front cover (M)

Figure 1.11: Nattini *Paradiso* front cover (P)

Figure 1.10: Nattini *Purgatorio* back cover (M)

Figure 1.12: Nattini *Paradiso* back cover (P)

an astral map (back; see fig. 1.12). The second and third canticles are also bound in lighter coloured leathers, *Purgatorio* in tan and *Paradiso* sometimes tan, sometimes white,[22] which alongside *Inferno* seem to gesture toward the pilgrim's movement from the utter darkness of hell to the blinding light of heaven, one of the principal leitmotifs of the *Commedia*. The inner linings appear to follow a similar aesthetic progression: the sapphire of the *Inferno* gives way to the teal silk of the *Purgatorio* (see fig. 1.13), which is embroidered in gold with a representation of Mount Purgatory surrounded by the 'P's for *peccatum* that are carved into the pilgrim's forehead upon his entry into Purgatory proper and that the angels of each terrace (also represented) will erase from it as he ascends toward the earthly paradise; the purgatorial teal in turn gives way to the white, ivory, and gold of the *Paradiso* lining (see fig. 1.14), upon which is woven a pyramid representing the angelic hierarchies (labeled) illuminated from behind by the Eye of Providence that likely represents the poet-pilgrim's final vision.

Figure 1.13: Nattini *Purgatorio* inner lining (P)

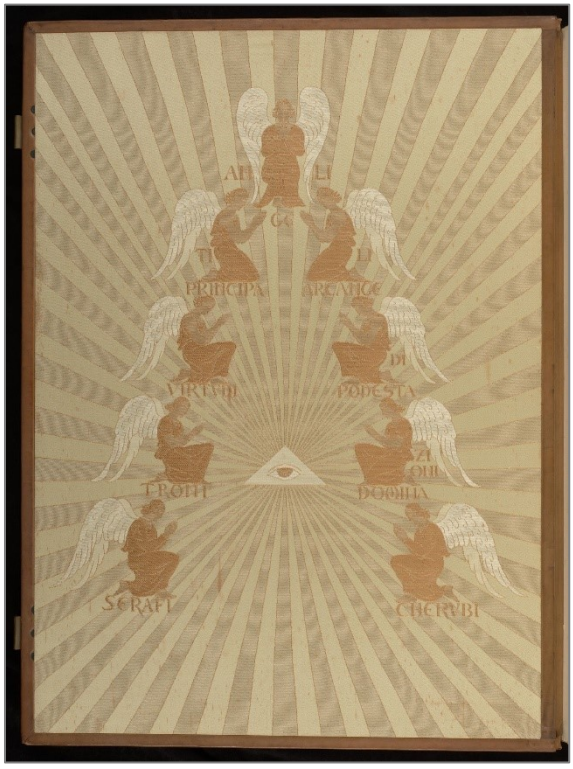

Figure 1.14: Nattini *Paradiso* inner lining (P)

[22] A colour photograph of the three bound volumes on a lectern reproduced in Cassinari 2012 (240) shows them bound in progressively lighter leathers, with the spine of what is most likely the *Paradiso* volume in white. Princeton's complete copy of Nattini's *Paradiso*, however, is bound in a similar coloured leather to McGill's *Purgatorio* volume, and Princeton's *Purgatorio* volume binding seems to match McGill's *Inferno*, which makes determining what the 'ideal' copy of the edition would have looked like difficult to determine.

No expense seems to have been too great for the ambitious editorial project, whether in terms of materials (to which the lavish volumes attest), time devoted to working on it, or its eventual presentation in public and private venues. Nattini and Valdameri from the beginning imagined the young artist's illustrated *Commedia* as a monument to Dante, and so the project quickly took on an architectonic dimension in the form of the lecterns specially commissioned for the monumental edition to also stand, wherever it was housed and displayed, as a literal monument. Mazzarelli argues that Nattini's and Valdameri's concept of monumentality for the *Imagini dantesche* project was likely inspired by D'Annunzio, who claimed in a 1911 *Lectura Dantis* that the *Commedia* should be placed "sul leggio come il Salterio e l'altra Scrittura santa" and housed "in un cofano" (qtd. in Mazzarelli 2015a, 17). Painter and patron seem to have taken the words to heart: one lectern in particular, suggestively known as the *Salterio*, was commissioned from the Milanese cabinet-maker Ettore Zaccari as early as 1921 for the express purpose of displaying Nattini's work-in-progress during public exhibitions. Roughly three metres tall and one wide, the *Salterio* featured a sculpture of a female nude standing with arms wide above her head, facing the readers or (more appropriately) viewers as they examined the work displayed above her.[23] Other lecterns, as mentioned earlier, were also commissioned at this time, from Eugenio Quarti (cabinet-maker), Giò Ponti (architect), and Tommaso Buzzi (architect). Intended for interested subscribers of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia*, these were smaller than the *Salterio*, measuring on average 90 x 105 x 75 cm (Gizzi 1998b, 115), but contributed no less to the monumentalizing drive behind the *Imagini dantesche* project insofar as, when purchased along with the volumes, they effectively served to erect a small monument to Dante in private and institutional libraries both in Italy and abroad.

[23] This lectern is now lost; extant photographs, however, like the one reproduced in Mazzarelli 2015a (16), preserve a record of its appearance.

Chapter 2: The *Commedia* Cycle

Nattini's original paintings, which are today held by the Bennicelli and Larini families, are primarily watercolours on various types of paper (the only exception being *Purg*. I, which is oil on canvas) (Gizzi 1998b, 115; Cassinari 2012, 247n40; see also Gizzi 1998a, 41). Mounted on wooden supports and framed likewise, the *Imagini dantesche* are still stored in the individual snap-buttoned linen bags handmade for that purpose by Nattini's wife (Cassinari 2012, 247n40). Most of the paintings are larger than the books in which they are reproduced, with average dimensions of 140 x 100 cm and most measuring 130 x 91 cm (Gizzi 1998a, 41, and 1998b, 115; Cassinari 2012, 247n41); the smallest and largest illustrations, respectively, measure 65 x 95 and 160 x 112 cm (Cassinari 2012, 247n41). The illustrations to *Inferno* show the greatest wear due to the type of paper on which they were painted (Cassinari 2012, 247n40), although more frequent exhibition may have also accelerated the process.

In the following pages, I will be examining the lithograph reproductions of the *Imagini* with three goals in mind: describing Nattini's style and his approach to illustration; providing an overview of how Nattini distinguishes himself from previous *Commedia* illustrators; and addressing what one might term the 'fetish of fidelity' that pervades most of the critical appraisals of Nattini's cycle. I argue that the insistence on an unqualified 'fidelity' even in the recent literature on Nattini's *Imagini* needs to be re-evaluated and anchored in a more critical discussion of Nattini's overall style in his *Commedia* illustrations for it to make sense as a description of the artist's general representational strategy. I further contend that the chaotic consensus whereby critics offer contradictory accounts of Nattini's style in the *Imagini* and yet unanimously proclaim the painter 'faithful' to Dante's poem is an inheritance from the work's original reception under Fascism that needs to be acknowledged and re-examined as an object of study in its own right, which in turn sheds a new light on Nattini's representational strategies and on the relation that his work entertains with the Fascist ideology of the time.

2.1. Illustrating the Commedia

Nattini makes use of many artistic styles as part of his representational strategy in his *Commedia* illustrations, with significant shifts observable from one canticle to the next. This has led some critics, such as Paola Pallottino and Cassinari, to deem the overall style of the *Imagini*

dantesche eclectic and difficult to categorize (Pallottino 1998, 88; Cassinari 2012, 243). In a response to Pallottino, however, Depalmi convincingly argues that Nattini's 'eclecticism' is in fact a consistent and purposeful variation of styles meant to reflect what literary scholars have identified as Dante's *plurilinguismo*, or the intentional collage of multiple stylistic and linguistic registers which Dante employs in his *Commedia* to distinguish between the different realities represented in his hell, purgatory, and heaven (Depalmi 2007, 30).[24]

I tend to agree with Depalmi's assessment: Nattini effectively establishes a close-knit relationship between his illustrations and Dante's poem by defining a purposefully eclectic style in his *Imagini* that translates Dante's *plurilinguismo* in the *Commedia* into a visual analogue. For example, the wider range of stylistic variation many critics have observed in the *Inferno* illustrations (see, for instance: Cassinari 2012; Barricelli 1992; Emelianova 2015c) matches the greater variety of linguistic registers and modes of speaking that Dante uses to texture and characterize the damned and their environment; conversely, the more homogeneous, religious-fresco style of the *Paradiso* illustrations mimics the more consistently elevated and theological-philosophical register of that canticle. This wilful variation has led to an inconsistent appraisal of the style of the *Imagini*, though, as critics have individually provided conflicting (and sometimes contradictory) accounts of the aesthetic of Nattini's *Commedia* paintings while simultaneously appearing united in proclaiming an ill-defined 'fidelity' in the artist's relationship to the poem he is illustrating. In what follows, I will attempt to systematize these heterogeneous descriptions to demonstrate that each describes one aspect of a composite style that unifies Nattini's *Imagini* while demystifying what critics intend when they speak of Nattini's 'fidelity' to the *Commedia*.

There are three main parts to Nattini's composite style in the *Imagini*, each of which is tied to a specific element in the composition of his illustrations: the naturalist realism of his backgrounds or environments; the hyper-realism of his bodies; and the symbolism, sometimes tinged with impressionism, in his use of colour and perspective to establish mood. For the backgrounds, as Jean-Pierre Barricelli notes, Nattini draws on Dante's detailed poetic

[24] Dante's variegated style in the *Commedia*, and his reasons for adopting such a style, are well documented. In the useful and concise *Understanding Dante* (2004), for instance, John A. Scott explains that Dante varied the style of the different sections of his *Commedia* in accordance with his belief that the style and language in which a topic is discussed ought to be appropriate to it (see pp. 171-172 and 264-266 in particular). For a fuller discussion, see also *Dante's Plurilingualism: Authority, Knowledge, Subjectivity* edited by Sara Fortuna, Manuele Gragnolati and Jürgen Trabant (2010).

descriptions of the spaces of the afterlife and renders them with a consummate realism that is almost scientific:

> [Nattini] studied the *Inferno* for every glow of light that it affords—fiery, gloomy, eerie, reflected, dim; he studied it for its different geological formations—rocks, ditches, fords, ices, ledges, overpasses, dikes, mountains, cliffs, and overhangs; he studied it for its vast symmetries and measured compositions, compelling tonalities and perspectives, spiritual beauty and integral naturalism—gigantic naturalism. He studied the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* for their otherworldly optics, for the natural but poetically realistic geophysical topography—lighted, darkened, verdant, fired, smokey [*sic*], forbidding—of the Mountain of Purgatory, and for the ethereal aerography—splendid, spacious, salvational [*sic*]—of the realm of beatitude (Barricelli 1992, 62-63; see also Barricelli 1986, 180).

Barricelli tends to get carried away in the flow of his purple prose, indulging in rhetorical flourishes to stress what he perceives as the fullness and objectivity of science and photography in Nattini's illustrations, but the attention to detail that he highlights in Nattini's *Commedia* landscaping is indeed one of the more remarkable features of the *Imagini* that evidences the artist's careful reading of the poem. To look at three representative examples, Nattini's *Inferno* XVII shows the stony rim and burning sands mentioned in line 24 as well as the yawning abyss that inspires such terror in the poet-pilgrim when he finds himself "ne l'aere d'ogne parte" (line 112),[25] unable to see anything of his surroundings during the descent on Geryon's back (see fig. 2.1); *Purgatorio* XXIX places Dante, Virgil, Statius, and Matelda just past a bend in the river Lethe, as described in line 11, its surface shimmering like a mirror (line 69) as they watch the holy procession walk past them, led by a figure bearing a golden candelabra whose flames paint the air with

Figure 2.1: Nattini *Inferno* XVII (M)

[25] All quotations from Dante's *Commedia* are based on the edition made available online through the *Princeton Dante Project* courtesy of Princeton University (https://dante.princeton.edu/pdp/).

Figure 2.2: Nattini *Purgatorio* XXIX (P)

Figure 2.3: Nattini *Paradiso* XX (P)

rainbow streaks (lines 73-78; see fig. 2.2); and *Paradiso* XXII shows Dante and Beatrice climbing a staircase (line 101) beneath which can be seen the seven heavenly spheres through which they have already travelled (lines 133-135; see fig. 2.3). Nattini thus appears to cull from the *Commedia* the relevant environmental details and then relies on a naturalist realism to give them visual form, 'faithful' to the poem insofar as his compositional choices are grounded in Dante's verse.

Nattini seems to employ a similar strategy to depict the human figures that populate his *Imagini*, relying on the poem to inform the gestures in which the bodies are engaged while rendering the figures in a hyper-realistic, anatomically accurate style reminiscent of Michelangelo. His mastery of the human form is commended by critics almost as often as his 'fidelity' to the *Commedia*: as early as 1922, when at most nine *Imagini dantesche* would have been ready for public display, critic Tommaso Gallarati Scotti was already lauding Nattini for his "conoscenza perfetta di questo corpo" and his ability to "agitare le masse infernali con una larghezza, complessità e precisione di movimento, che nelle illustrazioni della Commedia [*sic*] non ha precedenti" (Gallarati Scotti 1922, 113-114). Gallarati Scotti's high praise finds echoes in more recent scholarship as well, such as in Barricelli's comment that Nattini draws bodies with an exactitude informed by a "knowing stress on muscle and bone articulation" and Depalmi's observation

that, even though their lines and details become 'softer' over the course of the illustration cycle, Nattini's human figures always retain "la loro concretezza e carnalità, mostrando ancora una volta l'uomo come protagonista" (Barricelli 1992, 57 [see also Barricelli 1986, 178]; Depalmi 2007, 30).

While the softening of Nattini's lines from *Inferno* I to *Paradiso* XXXIII is minimal at best, the human bodies in all three of my example illustrations (figs. 2.1-3 on pages 21-22) attest to the skillful realism that critics throughout the *Imagini*'s reception history have found so enthralling. The figures are moreover positioned as Dante describes in the illustrated cantos (the usurers languishing on the strip of burning sand next to the abyss leading to the Circle of Fraud in *Inferno* XVII, even wearing the specific purses Dante had mentioned around their necks; the neat and orderly procession walking at a solemn pace in *Purgatorio* XXIX; the blessed making their rounds up and down Jacob's ladder in *Paradiso* XXII) and seem to be inscribed with their moral status in the afterlife through their physiognomy. As Barricelli observes, Nattini's damned appear "beyond shame" in the sensual nakedness of sin whilst his penitent demonstrate shame in the more prudish nakedness of sinfulness, at times even using their arms to cover themselves (Barricelli 1992, 57); the blessed, whose fully clothed status Barricelli does not address, could in this schema be metaphorically cloaked in virtue.

The compositional adherence to the poem is fractured, however, by the overwhelming modernity of the figures' physiognomy. As per his preference for 'real life' models, Nattini seems to have drawn inspiration for the figures populating his *Imagini* by sketching his contemporaries in their everyday lives: Cassinari, Irina Emelianova, and Rossana Bossaglia all speak to the early twentieth-century appearance of Nattini's figures, the men and women "atteggiati, pettinati, le donne addirittura truccate come persone vere, colte nelle sembianze e nei modi del presente" (Bossaglia qtd. in Cassinari 2012, 245), their faces in particular bearing "grande impatto ritrattistico" (Emelianova 2015c, 30). The anachronism produces an uncanny effect, suggesting a level of distancing and reinterpretation of the poem that the text-to-image accuracy of the backgrounds does not quite mask, as if the figures were modern actors putting on a medieval play. Nattini's 'fidelity' to the poem thus takes on a performative aspect, whereby he casts his contemporaries in the roles of the souls the poet-pilgrim encounters on his journey, recreating the scenes as they are described but also showing his hand at work by visually dating his figures.

Nattini lastly adds a layer of 'otherworldliness' to his *Imagini* by combining the realism and hyper-realism of his backgrounds and bodies with the Symbolism he uses to establish the differing mood and atmosphere of each canticle. Critics have noted that the *Inferno*, for instance, bears traces of a Divisionist aesthetic (impressionistic branch of Symbolism) reminiscent of the work of Gaetano Previati, which Nattini blends with the *verismo*[26] and naturalism of the Genoese Scuola Grigia (Depalmi 2007, 30). The *Purgatorio* illustrations instead recall the 'parallelist' Symbolism of Ferdinand Hodler, blended with the hyper-realist naturalism that will become characteristic of Nattini's post-*Commedia* oeuvre (Cassinari 2012, 244), whereas the *Paradiso* makes use of a more traditional Catholic iconography, such as the "cortine di nuvole e apoteosi di santi" typical of church frescoes and altar-pieces (Cassinari 2012, 244; Depalmi 2007, 30; Barricelli 1992, 52).

We can see these stylistic influences at work in my three example illustrations, but perhaps more notable in the *Imagini* is how Nattini assigns a distinct colour palette and perspective to each canticle, which generally work together to place the damned, for instance, down in a darkened hell, while the blessed are up in an effulgent heaven. In the *Inferno*, Nattini alternates between warmer reds and browns and cooler blues depending on the mood of each canto and what part of Dante's hell he is representing (Cassinari 2012, 243). The illustration to *Inferno* XVII partly combines both these palettes, the heat of the bodies seated on the scorching sands under a rain of flames drawing on the former while the light-less abyss into which Geryon is diving begins to draw on the latter (see fig. 2.1 on page 21). *Purgatorio* is in contrast an explosion of brighter colours: it features sapphire and sky blues, ashen and pearly violets, light browns and greys, some orange and red (in the pilgrim's clothing and in the purifying wall of flame that makes up the terrace of lust), and, particularly in Eden, a burst of greens (Cassinari 2012, 244; Depalmi 2007, 30). The colours are especially rich and varied in Nattini's Earthly Paradise, as exemplified in the illustration to *Purgatorio* XXIX (see fig. 2.2 on page 22), but even in the illustrations to *Purgatorio* featuring a more restricted chromatic range, the brightness of natural light permeates the palette, distinguishing the spaces of purgation from those of damnation. Lastly, Nattini attempts to capture the increasing brightness that Dante describes as characteristic of *Paradiso* by relying on a preponderance of pale blues and golden yellows

[26] Italian branch of French literary naturalism.

(Cassinari 2012, 244; Depalmi 2007, 30); this is especially noticeable in the backgrounds, as can be seen in the illustration to *Paradiso* XXII (see fig. 2.3 on page 22).

Nattini's play with perspective follows a similar pattern across his illustrations to the three canticles, where it is frequently used to situate the viewer behind the poet-pilgrim's eyes. Cassinari astutely observes that Nattini seems to be accompanying Dante along his journey with a camera, capturing what, and most importantly how, the poet sees, "costringendoci soprattutto nell'*Inferno* a guardare dall'alto la miseria dei dolenti e dannati, mentre nel *Paradiso* la visione viene ribaltata dovendo noi umani contemplare i santi e i beati alzando gli occhi al cielo, enfatizzando così la fuga prospettica verso l'alto" (Cassinari 2012, 243; see also Barricelli 1992, 62). Moral and physical point of view overlap in these compositional choices to body forth not only the poet-pilgrim's spatial position in relation to the souls he encounters but also his attitude toward them, with many of the damned, for example, positioned in a low angle of the pilgrim's field of vision whilst most of the blessed are at a higher angle, the viewers invited to look up at them alongside Dante just as they are often invited to look down on the damned, literally *and* figuratively. In the *Purgatorio* illustrations, Depalmi notes that the perspective tends to be less daring and more straightforward (Depalmi 2007, 30); in Nattini's moralized spatiality, this might serve to imply a shared position between the poet, the viewer, and the souls still in the process of preparing themselves for heaven: not (yet) damned, but not yet blessed either.

The viewer's perspective on an illustration, however, does not always coincide with the poet-pilgrim's point of view within it, just as Nattini's hell is not always as dark as one might expect it to be given that critics like Barricelli base their assessment of the painter's 'fidelity' to the poem on his attention to and realistic rendition of environmental details. This separation of the viewer's perspective from the poet-pilgrim's is more frequent in the *Inferno* illustrations, happening only occasionally in *Purgatorio* and seldom if ever in *Paradiso*. So while it is true that Nattini's poet-pilgrim typically looks down at the damned, straight at the penitent, and up at the blessed, the viewer is occasionally 'looked down at' by the poet-pilgrim, and sometimes even by the damned, most notably by Nattini's towering Lucifer, which raises interesting questions regarding the moral context ascribed to the viewer by the illustrations and again draws attention to the artist's hand and his autonomy from the poem he illustrates.

The overall effect of this composite style, of which different critics have underlined different aspects, is to establish a visual representational strategy for illustrating the *Commedia*

that is analogous to Dante's linguistic representational strategy in the poem, through which the poet masterfully combines a wide range of registers in a commitment to reality. Through a conscious and systematic eclecticism, Nattini replicates and adapts Dante's *plurilinguismo* into a functional visual counterpart that unifies his one hundred *Imagini* and attests to his sensitivity to the interplay between form, content, and symbolism in the *Commedia*. His oft-lauded and seldom qualified 'fidelity' might thus be understood as an effort to anchor his visual adaptation in the concrete details provided by the poem while supplementing that which is not described in photographic detail with modern reference — such as modelling his figures on his contemporaries — which allows Nattini greater freedom to visually interpret what each illustrated scene would look like, matching Dante's linguistic commitment to reality with a visual commitment to realism all the while conserving the otherworldliness of Dante's afterlife through Symbolism. Nattini does attempt, and in some ways succeeds, to establish a near-exact text-to-image translation of the *Commedia*, but as I will demonstrate shortly, Nattini is committed less to producing a completely faithful visual version of the *Commedia* (whatever that would mean) than to his particular *interpretation* of the medieval poem, which he shares with his viewers through his compositional choices, and which evidences a level of reinvention and ideological repositioning of the text.

2.2. Making One's Mark

Nattini in fact makes the *Commedia* his own through his compositional choices, grounding the details he includes in Dante's verse but making clear and at times idiosyncratic interpretive choices regarding what to represent in a given canto, choices which are occasionally at odds with the emphases Dante establishes through story-telling in the poem. For example, Nattini frequently breaks the mold established by his predecessors by privileging the global scene over the specific encounter (Cassinari 2012, 243; Barricelli 1992, 54-56, and 1986, 177). Particularly striking in this regard is Nattini's illustration to *Inferno* V (see fig. 2.4), in which neither Paolo nor Francesca, "that favorite [*sic*] dyad of previous artists" as Barricelli describes them, is especially noticeable in the maelstrom of souls punished in the circle of lust (Barricelli

Figure 2.4: Nattini *Inferno* V (P)

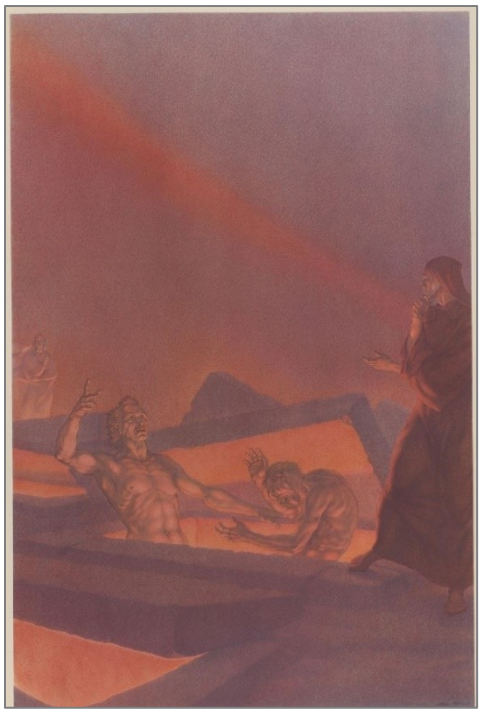

Figure 2.5: Nattini *Inferno* X (P)

1992, 54; see also Barricelli 1986, 177).[27] This is not to say that Nattini never reproduces previous illustrators' focus on singular personalities: Farinata degli Uberti, for instance, is given pride of place in the illustration to *Inferno* X (see fig. 2.5), in a composition reminiscent of Gustave Doré's (fig. 2.6) and Duilio Cambellotti's (fig. 2.7) renditions of the same scene (Cassinari 2012, 243; see also Barricelli 1992, 54 and 1986, 178).

Even in his more 'traditional' illustrations, however, Nattini often includes an additional 'globalizing' dimension all his own: for example, in the illustration to *Inferno* X Nattini places Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti next to Farinata in the open tomb they share in the infernal City of Dis, which Doré and Cambellotti do not, thus providing a more complete representation of the encounter; similarly, as Cassinari observes, in his illustration to *Inferno* XVII Nattini may recreate Doré's and Alberto Zardo's portrayal of Dante and Virgil on Geryon's back (compare figs. 2.8-9 to fig. 2.1 on page 21), but he also enlarges the scope of the scene to include the usurers the poet-pilgrim meets while waiting for Geryon (Cassinari 2012, 244), thus effecting an efficient compromise between the global and the specific.

Nattini's emphasis on the global scene, as critics have rightly observed, does have its roots in Dante's encyclopedic descriptions of his hell, purgatory, and heaven, but it does impose a greater distancing between the viewer and the scene than exists in the poem, in which

[27] Barricelli further lists *Inferno* XII, XIV, XVI, XVIII, XX, XXVI, XXIX, and XXXII as well as *Purgatorio* VII, X, XX, XXV, XXIX, and XXX as examples of illustrations in which "true to Dante's experience, it is the total scene that occupies [Nattini's] lithograph" (Barricelli 1992, 55-56; see also Barricelli 1986, 178).

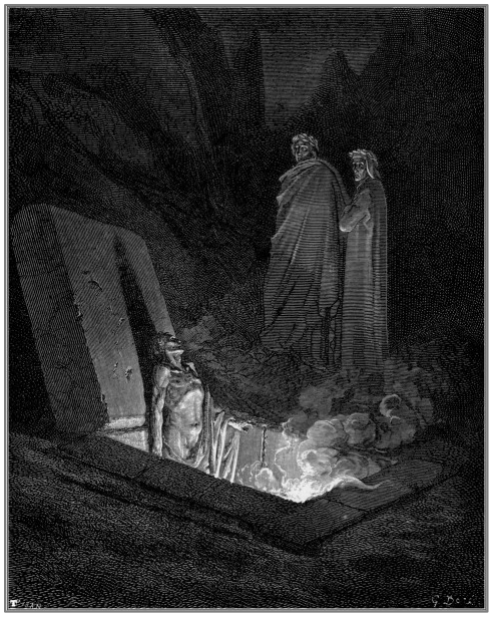

Figure 2.6: Doré *Inferno* X

Figure 2.7: Cambellotti *Inferno* X

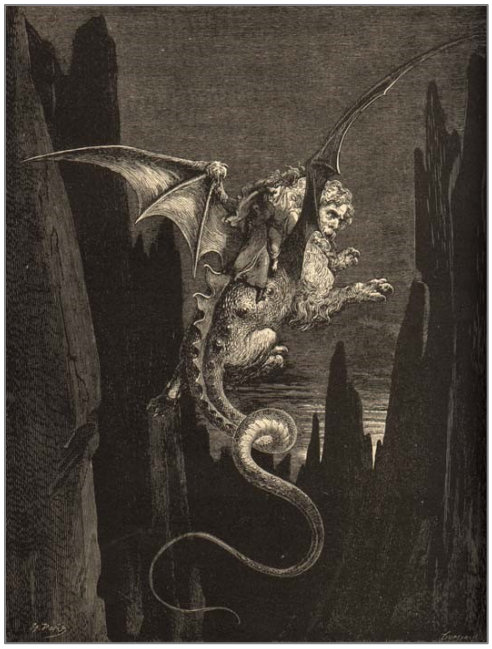

Figure 2.8: Doré *Inferno* XVII

Figure 2.9: Zardo *Inferno* XVII

the reader is essentially right by the poet-pilgrim's side while he interacts with the damned, the penitent, and the blessed. This distancing between the viewer and the poet-pilgrim is deepened by Nattini's further interpretive choice to represent only what would have been 'visible' to the characters in the *Commedia*, excluding from his visual adaptation of the poem any illustration of what the characters only 'hear.' Cassinari commends this aspect of Nattini's representational strategy as evidence of his "approccio filologico al testo" (Cassinari 2012, 242-243), although one may wonder what is 'philological' about leaving aside the bulk of the content of the *Commedia*, which is essentially made up of the various stories the poet-pilgrim hears without which the poet-pilgrim's journey through the afterlife loses its meaning.

Yet Nattini makes the peculiar and conscious choice to supplement the text — which, while it gives many descriptions of what is seen, ultimately focuses on what is heard through conversation with the various souls the Dante-pilgrim encounters on his journey — with what the visual experience one would have walking in the Dante-pilgrim's footsteps through the different regions of the afterlife, leaving the 'auditory' experience — the conversations with the shades of the dead — to the words printed on the page. In so doing, the painter seems to orchestrate a sharing of narrative tasks between the poem and his illustrations of it, or better yet between himself and Dante as visual and verbal artists respectively,[28] whereby text and image complement each other and work together to tell a fuller story. This division of labour, however, speaks to the constructiveness and unavoidably interpretive quality of Nattini's aesthetic that the notion of a faithful 'mirroring' of the *Commedia* in the *Imagini*, which most critics discussed in this chapter seem to silently embrace, fails to capture.

The painter's 'fidelity' to the poem, as demonstrated by the compositional choices discussed thus far, is then perhaps better understood as a noteworthy respect for the integrity of the poem, insofar as Nattini draws on Dante's verse and does not typically stray far from the poet's words in designing the spaces of the poem and the characters' positioning within them, that is nonetheless subordinated to a selective interpretation regarding which moments merit illustration. This becomes especially obvious in the illustrations to cantos containing particularly memorable and symbolically weighty encounters, such as *Inferno* XXVI, when the poet-pilgrim meets Ulysses, or *Purgatorio* XXVII, when he reaches the Earthly Paradise. In both these illustrations, Nattini unconventionally chooses to illustrate the moment preceding the memorable encounter. In his version of *Inferno* XXVI, for instance, rather than give Ulysses pride of place as do most other illustrators, Nattini instead represents the moment in which the poet-pilgrim and Virgil enter the *bolgia* of fraudulent advisors when Virgil has yet to pick Ulysses out of the crowd, thus choosing to render Ulysses, if at all, indistinguishably from the other souls of the damned shrouded in flame in this section of hell (Cassinari 2012, 243; Barricelli 1992, 54 and

[28] It may be worth remembering that Nattini also designed the typeface in which Dante's text was engraved onto copper plates and pressed onto the page by the artist himself, so that every visual element of Nattini's edition of the *Commedia*, including the letters that enable people to read the text in the volumes, was provided by the painter.

1986, 177; see fig. 2.10). Similarly, the illustration to *Purgatorio* XXVII focuses on the journey up from the Terrace of Lust rather than the key moment of the poet-pilgrim's arrival in the Earthly Paradise and ensuing farewell to his guide Virgil, who utters his final words in the last line of the canto and will silently disappear once the travellers reach Beatrice (Barricelli 1992, 4; see fig. 2.11). The depiction of the climb, like the depiction of the entry into the *bolgia* of fraudulent advisors, is not technically 'inaccurate' or 'unfaithful' to the poem in terms of what is described there, but it certainly downplays the narrative importance and symbolic weight of each moment and displaces the main focus of each canto, eliding these key encounters from the visual adaptation that accompanies them in the process.

Figure 2.10: Nattini *Inferno* XXVI (P)

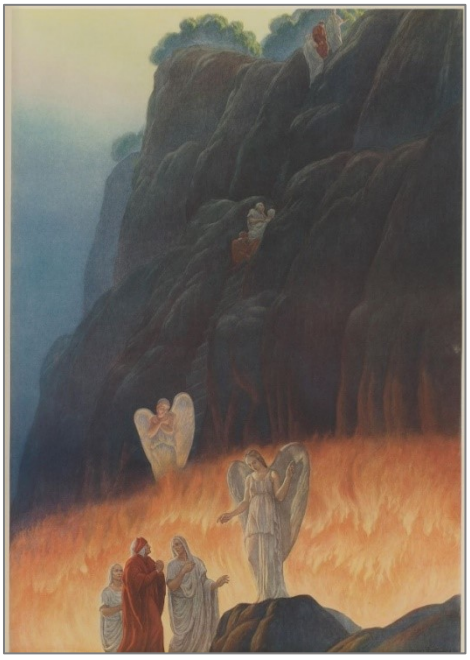

Figure 2.11: Nattini *Purgatorio*

There is nothing inherently wrong with these representational choices which, in foregrounding less often depicted moments of the *Commedia*, can offer a new perspective on Dante's poem and help Nattini differentiate himself from the plethora of other *Commedia* illustrators that precede and succeed him. That being said, all of these choices seriously problematize the notion that Nattini is somehow 'perfectly faithful' to the *Commedia* because they demonstrate that he is an active reader and interpreter who works *with* the text of the poem in his illustrations but not *for* it in any hierarchical sense; the images, in other words, are in an equal rather than subservient relationship to the verse, in dialogue with the poem rather than meekly mirroring it. In selecting what to illustrate, especially in the *Imagini* that break with tradition in terms of their focus, Nattini is *de facto* providing a particular interpretation of the *Commedia*, which is something to which the Lucifer, in its exceptionally transgressive design (discussed in chapter 4), draws attention. The

performative 'fidelity' of Nattini's overall representational strategy, which effects a highly selective near-exact text-to-image translation of the poem (if by this is meant that a reader could pick out the verses from which Nattini culled the details of the scenes he depicts and generally find their match in the *Imagini*), thus appears to work as a veil by means of which the medieval poem becomes a vehicle for a message that is no longer Dante's, even if couched in an interpretation of the *Commedia*.

2.3. The Fetish of Fidelity

Acknowledgement of the dialogue Nattini establishes between the *Commedia* and his *Imagini* through his representational strategy is yet strangely absent in the available literature. While some critics and scholars may allude to or even explicitly acknowledge Nattini's deviations from Dante's text, those same critics and scholars are typically the staunchest advocates of Nattini's 'absolute' faithfulness to the poem's descriptions, and they tend to fetishize this perceived perfect fidelity to an extreme point, presenting it as the most distinctive and commendable characteristic of the illustration cycle. This is most evident in Barricelli's work on Nattini, although it permeates most available scholarship on the *Imagini*: in the last twelve years or so, Depalmi and Cassinari have also made arguments that strongly stress and commend the close mimetic relationship between image and text in Nattini's illustrations, especially in the *Inferno* (as discussed above).

Barricelli, however, remains the most emphatic in his enthusiasm for Nattini's textual fidelity, typically addressing the topic with much bombast in his writing. For example, when comparing the many visual renditions of the *Commedia* in his 1996 "Dante in the Arts: A Survey," Barricelli argues that in most nineteenth- and twentieth-century illustrators of the *Commedia* "the tendency to personalize the Dantean scene is pronounced" and that "*Only* Nattini . . . did not personalize the poem," but rather "remained *totally faithful* to the text, with a sense of poetic realism abetted by great anatomical craftsmanship, enough for the viewer to say that, in Dante's mind's eye, *this is what he saw*" (Barricelli 1996, 86-87; my emphasis). In his earlier work specifically on Nattini, Barricelli presents a similar argument, claiming that Nattini rendered his illustrations of the *Commedia* "not with the private stylizations of previous serial commentators like Botticelli, Blake, and Doré or with the modernistic emphases of later ones like Rauschenberg and Dalí, or with the vibrant pictorial figurations of Phillips, but with the

affectionate attention of an accurate and philosophical reader, steeped in the Renaissance aesthetics that Dante adumbrated" (Barricelli 1992, 62-63; see also Barricelli 1986, 180).

The main issue with Barricelli's language in these appraisals is that it elides the distinction between text and image, medieval poet and modern illustrator, that is crucial to understanding the images on the basis of what they present to the viewer. It further espouses an uncritical and contradictory notion of fidelity and realism, conflating a broad range of vague terms and categories that Barricelli does not sufficiently explicate. In its overall effect, the language implies that Nattini is untouchable, that as the 'perfectly faithful' illustrator there is little to be said of the ways in which his *Imagini* do (and do not) correspond to the text of the *Commedia*. In a way, this kind of appraisal mythologizes Nattini, obfuscating the fact that he is an interpreter of the poem, situated in a specific epoch that could not but influence his thinking, and that, in any case, representation is by nature a form of interpretation. To put it differently, Nattini is not an automaton mystically animated by the ghost of Dante: rather, he is an artist making his own aesthetic and representational choices independently from the poet who pre-deceased him by several centuries.

The compositional choices discussed above, for instance, rather than demonstrating, as Barricelli argues, that Nattini did not personalize the *Commedia*, suggest a particular interpretation that, while often 'faithful' to the written descriptions in the poem, remains nonetheless an interpretation according to which the painter (not the poet) decides what the most salient elements are in any given canto, thereby including some details or events while excluding others. The illustration to *Inferno* XXVI, mentioned earlier, is a perfect example: it is suggestive that the artist chooses not to distinguish Ulysses, an iconic figure, from the other fraudulent advisors, choosing instead to depict the scene the way the poet-pilgrim would have seen it *before* he notices ". . . quel foco che vien sì diviso / di sopra, che par surger de la pira / dov' Eteòcle col fratel fu miso" in which the Greek hero burns for eternity with Diomedes (*Inf.* XXVI.52-54); what is essentially the most significant encounter of the canto, to which Dante devoted two thirds of its verses (lines 49-142), is not represented.

Of even greater significance in this regard is Nattini's treatment of Ugolino della Gherardesca in his illustration to *Inferno* XXXIII: while the figure, unlike Ulysses, is clearly distinguishable as it chews up Archbishop Ruggieri's skull, both figures are relegated to the distant middle-ground of the illustration, isolated from the rest of the sinners trapped in ice in the

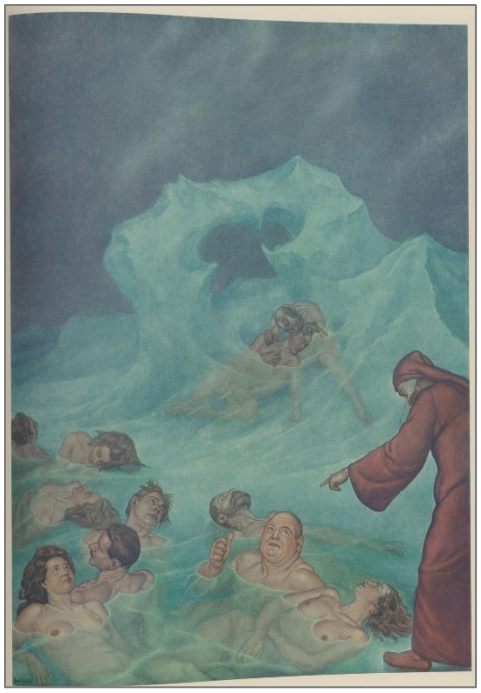

Figure 2.12: Nattini *Inferno* XXXIII

Antenora section of Dante's frozen Cocytus whilst the poet-pilgrim and Virgil are in discussion with Fra Alberigo, who is directing their attention to Branca Doria with his thumb, in the foregrounded Ptolomea section (see fig. 2.12). Not only has Nattini in this illustration chosen, contrary to what most previous illustrators have done, *not* to depict Ugolino's harrowing tale of watching his children die before him in the 'tower of hunger' and wallowing in sadness until "più che 'l dolor, poté 'l digiuno" (*Inf*. XXXIII line 75),[29] he further distances the viewer from what is arguably the most compelling encounter of Dante's ninth circle of hell — which occupies lines 1 to 90 of the canto, seventy of which are spoken directly by Ugolino — in favour of highlighting a much less memorable one (which occupies lines 109 to 157, less than half the space Dante accords to Ugolino). The painter thereby visually de-prioritizes Ugolino even more emphatically than he had Ulysses, which implies a profound re-interpretation of *Inferno* XXXIII that pushes the limits of what could be reasonably understood as 'fidelity' to the poem. Nattini here is still painting within the established constraints of his representational strategy, given that for the most part every detail of his illustration finds its analogue in the poem (although one might question how bright this supposedly light-less area of Dante's hell appears), yet his choice of what to prioritize flirts with the distortion of Dante's canto that he will embrace in the Lucifer figure in his *Inferno* XXXIV where, rather than moving the canto's 'protagonist' into the shadows as he does with Ulysses and Ugolino, Nattini will magnify his completely redesigned Devil, breaking completely with the poem and with his own stylistic rules.

Barricelli does comment on some instances of 'personalization' in Nattini's *Imagini*, but only in his earlier writings (an article from 1986 and a book chapter from 1992); moreover, the personalizations or 'infidelities' he does notice, and which he seems to completely forget about in his 1996 survey article of Dante in the arts, tend to be superficial and somewhat arbitrary. The

[29] Whereas Gustave Doré, for instance, produces several illustrations of Ugolino in the tower as well as one of Ugolino trapped in Antenora.

examples Barricelli discusses in most depth are *Inferno* II and X, as well as the style of *Paradiso* generally, in which he claims that Nattini's vision "falters," unable to perform "the miracle of developing from light that is already radiant in Canto I through the nine spheres plus the Empyrean of ever more intense luminescence" which Dante, by virtue of the verbal medium, can leave to the reader's imagination (Barricelli 1992, 59).

I grant that Barricelli has a point regarding the overall effect of Nattini's *Paradiso*, which in some ways is less satisfying than his *Inferno* or *Purgatorio* for precisely this reason: Nattini's use of traditional Catholic iconography to depict Dante's heaven is at times an awkward compromise that seeks to lessen the gap between what the poet can achieve through the trope of ineffability that the painter cannot. The chosen solution may thus be imperfect, but there are few models (let alone models successful according to Barricelli's criteria) from which Nattini could have drawn inspiration, *Paradiso* being the least illustrated canticle of the *Commedia* because it is so difficult to render visually what the poet constantly reminds the reader cannot be described.

Conversely, Barricelli's critiques of textual infidelities in *Inferno* II and X are at once more forgiving and less pertinent than his appraisal of the *Paradiso*, begging the question of why he elaborates them in the first place. In both instances, Barricelli considers the addition of Nattini's "fantasy" to the illustrations, which he specifies are rare moments in an overall mimetically faithful cycle, to be "justified," if not by the letter than by the spirit of the poem (Barricelli 1992, 50; see also Barricelli 1986, 176). In *Inferno* II (see fig. 2.13), this added fantasy is the ethereal figure of Beatrice in the middle right of the illustration and, just above her in the top-right corner, what appears to be a glimpse into the Empyrean, which is "justified, not by what Dante says, but by Virgil's words describing the heavenly chain of command that brought him to Dante's side" (*ibid*), a rare instance in which Nattini depicts something outside the poet-pilgrim's literal field of vision. In *Inferno* X, at least according to Barricelli, "more boldly and with underscored poetry, Nattini gratuitously—at first sight—introduces a rainbow [. . .] during Dante's colloquy with Farinata,

Figure 2.13: Nattini *Inferno* II (P)

apparently his most pronounced departure from textual indication" (Barricelli 1992, 52; my emphasis; see also Barricelli 1986, 177). Allegedly, this rainbow "acts as a halo" around Farinata and would be thematically justified by the shade's prediction of the poet's exile, "a stormy announcement followed by sunnier circumstances," although I must confess that, even after spending at least an hour poring over the lithograph in McGill's copy of Nattini's *Inferno* with a magnifying glass, I have not been able to discern it in the image (see fig. 2.5 on page 27). The presence (or rather absence) of this rainbow, however, is less problematic than Barricelli's concluding assertion that "Nattini's intrusions on the text *end there*. All else he illustrates with *literal* faithfulness, not just to Dante's vision, but to his spirit as well" (Barricelli 1992, 53; my emphasis; see also Barricelli 1986, 177).

This assertion is utterly baffling to me, especially given that the Lucifer, which I will discuss further in the final chapter of this thesis *and which Barricelli describes*, nullifies the argument the statement upholds. In his 1986 article, "Renaissance Painters--Dante and Nattini: An Essay," Barricelli in fact comments—accurately no less—on both Dante's and Nattini's Lucifers, if at separate times, yet he does not seem to recognize the dissonance between the two. Barricelli first writes about Dante's monstrous king of hell, noting that

> Dante picks up on the Platonic tradition that interpreted the four rivers of Hades . . . as four stages of expiatory punishment for the wicked after death, but while some scholars are correct in distinguishing between this view and the later Renaissance view . . . that they signify 'the fourfold aspect of matter enslaving the human soul at the moment of birth,' it is also true that Dante prepared such a concept through his progressive thickening, or 'materialization,' of the rivers. [. . .] And he culminates the process of materialization symbolically by depicting Lucifer *not as a Miltonic Satan with human attributes and a will of his own but as a machine*, the final enslaving product of the material (Barricelli 1986, 162; my emphasis).

Later in the chapter, he observes in passing that Nattini's Lucifer appears "blurred like a negative echo of Leonardo's Christ in 'The Last Supper'" (Barricelli 1986, 178; observation repeated verbatim in Barricelli 1992, 54). Barricelli thus clearly picks up on the Miltonic humanity of Nattini's Lucifer, and opposes Milton's Satan to Dante's Lucifer in his discussion of the latter, and yet still proclaims that the "gratuitous rainbow" in the illustration to *Inferno* X (were it even there) is Nattini's "most pronounced departure from textual indication."

To give Barricelli and other like-minded critics their due, their assessment of Nattini's textual 'fidelity,' when analyzed and qualified as I have done in the first two sections of this chapter, is true in general if not in absolute. Nattini is moreover usually subtle in his divergences from the poem, more often displacing the focus of a canto or modernizing the appearance of the shades the poet-pilgrim encounters than rewriting it completely, which is why his Lucifer is so striking in its non-conformity to *Inferno* XXXIV. The problem is that the largely uncritical assertions about Nattini's textual fidelity flatten what Nattini is doing in his illustrations, which gives rise to vague and paradoxical arguments that maintain that Nattini demonstrates 'true faithfulness' to the *Commedia* but also 'more than illustrates' the poem,[30] thereby perpetuating an attitude toward Nattini and his work that, as I will discuss in the following chapter, is inherited from the *Imagini*'s reception and appropriation under Fascism.

To properly understand the *Imagini dantesche*, Nattini's illustrations should therefore be considered in their full context, not just as *Commedia* illustrations but also as stand-alone cultural products many of which, the Lucifer included, were created under Fascism. The obsession with Nattini's textual 'fidelity' has hitherto resulted in a misguided erasure of the historicity of the *Imagini* in the available literature, leading to a skewed understanding of the significance of Nattini's work. In the next chapter, I will thus turn to the exhibition and reception history of Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations from 1915 to 1945, focusing especially on the language in which the illustration cycle is praised, as a means of situating the work within its historical context and facing the assumptions, biases, and politics that informed its early reception and development.

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[30] Some such arguments, with which Barricelli's work on Nattini is peppered, are phrased as follows: Nattini "accomplished more than can be expected of an illustrator. His philosophical aesthetic remained an objective depiction of the poem, but his means to that end was a penetrating grasp of it, within the time-honored tradition of Classical naturalism, to elucidate subtleties and nuances, and to make the art of illustration not submissively mimetic but respectfully creative" (Barricelli 1992, 62); "Nattini is the model of a faithful illustrator and, through his art, of an admiring interpreter" (Barricelli 1992, 62; see also Barricelli 1986, 180); "As Dante's illustrator, Nattini attempted, not to make the *Commedia* his own, but rather to make it ours, in the form of a *visibile parlare*" (Barricelli 1992, 63; see also Barricelli 1986, 180); that Nattini's watercolours "siano non illustrazioni, ma interpretazioni, è dimostrato dal fatto che sono da lui presentati come Imagini, nel senso di figurazioni in ambito mnemonico, fantastico, affettivo; o forse più propriamente nel senso di visioni" (Gizzi 1998a, 40); "Nattini infatti seppe *più che illustrare*, interpretare acutamente, profondamente la poesia di Dante in tutti i suoi elementi" (Pellegri 1979, 136; my emphasis); "Nattini, come un demiurgo, plasma la sua opera all'interno di una concezione vitalistica dannunziana dove l'arte è manifestazione dello spirito: le sue Imagini *non sono semplici illustrazioni*, ma potentissime 'visioni' che rendono viva e palpitante la parola" (Cassinari 2012, 242; my emphasis).

Chapter 3: Exhibition, Reception, Appropriation

Nattini's work on his *Imagini dantesche* was regularly punctuated by exhibitions of completed portions of the project, giving critics ample opportunity to view and comment on them throughout the 1920s and '30s. Much like those found in modern scholarship, most accounts of and from these exhibitions tend toward awe of work well executed and wonder before the perceived exact correspondence between poem and picture. As the *Imagini dantesche* garnered ever greater critical success, however, there appears to have been a corresponding increase in praise coming from public persons who seem less interested in the images Nattini was producing than in what symbolic meanings his gargantuan project could be infused with in the service of the Fascist nation. Indeed, like other contemporaneous high-profile cultural projects, Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* was 'Fascistized' to serve the regime's interests in mobilizing Italian culture for the purposes of expanding an informal empire of influence as well as fashioning Fascism, and more specifically its leader, as a historic agent — Dante's prophesied 'Veltro' — typologically fulfilling the greatness prefigured by Italy's past (Fogu 2003; Scorrano 2001; Martin 2005; Falasca-Zamponi 1997 and 1998).

In the following pages, I will thus trace the exhibition and reception history of the *Imagini dantesche* from 1915 to 1945 in order to highlight the emergence of a properly Fascist presentation and interpretation of Nattini's project that reaches its fullest expression by 1931 with the much-documented Parisian exhibition of the completed *Inferno* at the Jeu-de-Paume. Next, I will closely examine the conclusion to a speech given by Mattia Limoncelli, a member of parliament from 1929 to 1934, at the 1930 Neapolitan exhibition of the nearly completed *Inferno* at the Maschio Angioino as a case study that demonstrates how Nattini's edition of the *Commedia* was used simultaneously as a platform for the promotion of a Fascist cultural imperialism loosely modelled on Latin Catholic evangelization as well as for the Fascistization of Dante's legacy. I will then further explore Fascism's relationship to Dante through the examples of Michele Barbi's 1931 entry on the poet in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* and Giuseppe Terragni's projected Danteum, the plans for which were elaborated in 1937-1938, in order to place the Fascistization of Nattini's project within the broader framework of the selective reclamation of Italian culture for the construction of a Fascist historic imaginary. Ultimately, I seek to clarify through these broader contexts the relationship between the *Imagini* project and

Fascism, a relationship that is largely ignored in scholarship but that I argue is crucial to an understanding of Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations that goes beyond their surface to uncover what they communicate to the viewer and how.

3.1. Exhibition and Reception of the **Imagini dantesche** *from 1915-1945*

When one peruses the literature on Nattini's *Imagini dantesche*, there emerge two key moments in the exhibition and reception history of the work: its official debut in 1919-1922, once Nattini seriously commits to his project and secures Rino Valdameri's patronage, and its first major milestone in 1930-1931, when the *Inferno* volume is complete. As noted in chapter 1, the very first showing of Nattini's *Imagini*, which took place in 1915 at the Permanente di Milano, was a pilot exhibition featuring one illustration per canticle (*Inf*. XII, *Purg*. XXVII, and *Par*. XXXIII); the favourable reception with which these first three paintings met convinced Nattini to apply himself seriously to his project and commit to producing an illustrated *Commedia* to surpass his illustrated *Canzoni delle gesta d'oltremare* (Gizzi 1998a, 40).

Work on the *Imagini dantesche* began in earnest only in 1919, with the next three public exhibitions, which I consider to be the project's official debut, taking place between December 1921 and March 1922. By 1921, Nattini and Valdameri had established a working relationship and founded the *Casa Editrice di Dante* (later *Istituto Nazionale Dantesco*), thereby formalizing the means by which Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* would be produced. The 1921-1922 exhibitions thus served to officially announce the projected oeuvre and attract both critical interest and potential subscribers. Each of these exhibitions featured Nattini's initial three *Imagini* alongside the more recently completed illustrations to *Inferno* I-VI (Gizzi 1998a, 46).

The first of these exhibitions, held in Florence on December 19, 1921, in the Società Leonardo da Vinci exhibition hall, elicited accolades from Ugo Ojetti, one of the foremost Italian art critics of the early twentieth century (and signatory of the 1925 *Manifesto degli intellettuali fascisti*) who was to become one of Nattini's most ardent supporters. In his review, Ojetti hailed Nattini as the first painter to have truly understood Dante and "reso la sua anima," outshining all previous *Commedia* illustrators (Gizzi 1998a, 46). Nattini's first nine *Imagini* met with similarly high praise from critic Tommaso Gallarati Scotti when they were displayed a month later in the Sala delle Asse of the Sforza Castle in Milan on January 20, 1922, a venue that was not usually made available to modern works. Waxing as poetic as he believed Nattini's illustrations to be,

Gallarati Scotti claimed in his review of the exhibition that Nattini "più che un pittore è un rivelatore e un interprete. E la suggestione dei suoi quadri nasce dal modo di penetrare e di fare suoi tutti gli elementi poetici, filosofici, etici e pittorici d'ogni canto, fino a darcene una sintesi emotiva" (Gallarati Scotti 1922, 115).

On that high note, the first nine *Imagini* were displayed for the general public once more in 1922, at the Università degli Studi di Genova on March 13 (Gizzi 1998a, 46-48). Corrado Ricci, however, an archeologist, art historian, and self-trained Dantist, considered Nattini's illustrations too profound and refined for any public venue to do them justice. He thus hosted an additional private exhibition in his home for a select audience "superiore per qualità a ogni altro pubblico" (Gizzi 1998a, 48). The elite roster of guests Ricci saw fit to invite comprised some of the most important actors on the Italian cultural and intellectual scene of the day, including the highly influential Idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce and the well-known art historian Adolfo Venturi (whose expertise would be called upon in several high profile court trials of the 1920s regarding the authenticity of paintings purported to be by Leonardo da Vinci).[31] Writing of the event to Valdameri, Ricci proclaimed that all of his guests shared his high opinion of Nattini's work and encouraged him to continue it (*ibid*).

Ricci's private showing concludes Nattini's official critical debut as a *Commedia* illustrator as well as what might be termed the 'pre-Fascist' reception of his *Imagini*. Likely thanks to Valdameri's involvement and connections,[32] Nattini entered the spotlight with the approval of renowned and respected critics, all of whom seem to have expressed nothing but wonder and enthusiasm for Nattini's ambitious artistic endeavour. Most of the praise these critics bestow at this early stage in the project revolves around Nattini's skill: the illustrations are impressive because the painter masterfully balances technical form and poetic spirit. The focus is on Nattini as artistic agent, on the talents he demonstrates and the promise his *Imagini* show of a fruitful career to come. Nattini, in other words, is the star of the show, his performance informed by his own creative genius as *homo faber*.

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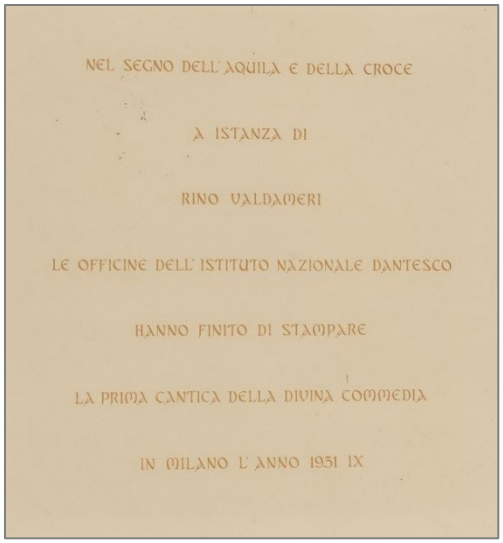
[31] Others present at the event were Baron Sidney Sonnino (founder and president of the Casa di Dante in Rome), Vittorio Rossi (journalist), Luigi Pietrobono (Dantist), Flaminio Pellegrini (academic with extensive background in Dante studies), Alessandro Bacchiani (either a Dantist or an art critic; sources scant and inconclusive), and Piero Giacosa (medical doctor and art aficionado) (Gizzi 1998a, 48).

[32] Not much is readily available on Rino Valdameri, although Irina Emelianova (2015c) does note that he was director of the Brera Academy of Fine Arts from 1935 to 1940 (29), and from the excerpt of Corrado Ricci's letter to him reproduced in Gizzi 1998a (48) Valdameri seems to have been on friendly terms with influential people, which makes it probable that Valdameri was the bridge between Nattini and most of his better-known supporters.

The advent of Fascism brought about a change of perspective on Nattini's works, which by the late 1920s and early '30s became firmly 'Fascistized.' Valdameri had in fact joined the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF) as of September 1922, "diventandone un esponente importante per la promozione culturale," mere weeks prior to the infamous March on Rome that ushered in the *ventennio* (Emelianova 2015b, 33). According to Irina Emelianova, as of the late 1920s "inizia così il processo di strumentalizzazione delle immagini dantesche [*sic*] di Nattini in chiave nazionalistica, in linea con le idee del regime" (*ibid*); the traces of this, I might add, are clearly inscribed on Nattini's prestigious illustrated edition itself in the publication dates specified in each volume's colophon, each of which ends with a Roman numeral signifying the Fascist year in which its print run was completed (see figs. 3.1-3).

The process of Fascist-nationalist instrumentalization of the *Imagini dantesche* likely began even earlier than Emelianova suggests, however, as the first concrete marker of this process at work is arguably the suggestive change Nattini and Valdameri's publisher name underwent sometime between 1922 and 1924 when the *Casa Editrice di Dante* was re-branded *Istituto Nazionale Dantesco*. The indication of the Fascist year at the end of each colophon thus appears to be an extension of a process of Fascistization of the editorial aspects of Nattini's project initiated contemporaneously with Valdameri's burgeoning involvement with the PNF, visibly if unobtrusively


NEL SEGNO DELL' AQUILA E DELLA CROCE

A ISTANZA DI

RINO VALDAMERI

LE OFFICINE DELL' ISTITUTO NAZIONALE DANTESCO

HANNO FINITO DI STAMPARE

LA PRIMA CANTICA DELLA DIVINA COMMEDIA

IN MILANO L' ANNO 1931 IX

Figure 3.1: Nattini *Inferno* colophon (P)


NEL SEGNO DELL' AQUILA E DELLA CROCE

A ISTANZA DI

RINO VALDAMERI

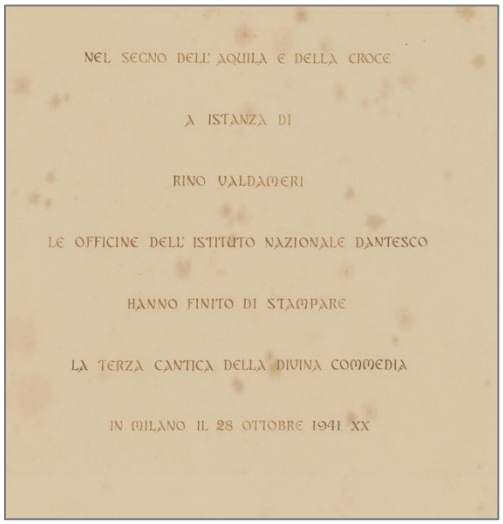
LE OFFICINE DELL' ISTITUTO NAZIONALE DANTESCO

HANNO FINITO DI STAMPARE

LA SECONDA CANTICA DELLA DIVINA COMMEDIA

IN MILANO IL 28 OTTOBRE 1936 XIV

Figure 3.2: Nattini *Purgatorio* colophon


NEL SEGNO DELL' AQUILA E DELLA CROCE

A ISTANZA DI

RINO VALDAMERI

LE OFFICINE DELL' ISTITUTO NAZIONALE DANTESCO

HANNO FINITO DI STAMPARE

LA TERZA CANTICA DELLA DIVINA COMMEDIA

IN MILANO IL 28 OTTOBRE 1941 XX

Figure 3.3: Nattini *Paradiso* colophon

marking the volumes as Fascist cultural products. The colophons to Nattini's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in particular further cement the association between the *Imagini* and Fascism as, unlike the *Inferno* colophon which records only the year of publication (the last line reading "IN MILANO L'ANNO 1931 IX"), these later two specify that the volumes were published on October 28, 1936 and 1941 respectively, which is to say on the fourteenth and nineteenth anniversaries of the Fascist March on Rome,[33] thus implying that the completion of the volumes is tied to the anniversary celebrations.

Following the official debut in the early twenties, the next run of regular exhibitions of the *Imagini* takes place from 1927 to 1931, with Nattini displaying his illustrations in venues across Italy "man mano [che] venivano realizzate" on at least nine different occasions (Gizzi 1998a, 48).[34] Based on the disproportionate amount of attention they receive in scholarship, the most important of these exhibitions are the 1927 Roman exhibition at the Casa di Dante, the 1931 Milanese exhibition in the Hall of Statues of the Sforza Castle, and the 1931 Parisian exhibition at the Jeu-de-Paume. The latter two mark the peak of public interest for the *Imagini* with the completion of the *Inferno* volume and culminate with the first — and most impressive — exhibition of the project abroad.

The Roman and Milanese exhibitions of 1927 and 1931 respectively were inaugurated by none other than King Vittorio Emanuele III himself. In Rome, early copies of Nattini's *Inferno* were given to the King as well as to Pope Pius XI and Mussolini, each of whom received the gift with symbolically charged praise: the Pope described the volume as the "gloria ed onore del nostro secolo" (qtd. in Gizzi 1998a, 49), whilst Mussolini declared it an "opera regale, altamente

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[33] The *Paradiso* colophon (see fig. 3.3 on page 40) actually records the volume's publication as occurring in the twentieth year of the Fascist regime ("IN MILANO IL 28 OTTOBRE 1941 *XX*"; italics mine) rather than the nineteenth, although whether this is accidental or by design would be difficult to ascertain.

[34] Gizzi provides the following list of exhibitions taking place after March 1922: "a Roma (maggio 1927), nella *Casa di Dante*; a Torino (marzo 1928), nel Circolo della Stampa; a Brescia (novembre 1928), nel Salone Vanvitelliano della Loggia di Città; a Parma (gennaio 1929), nell'Università degli Studi; a Milano (marzo 1929), nella Sala del Consiglio del Castello Sforzesco; a Viareggio (agosto 1929), nel Palazzo di città; a Napoli (marzo 1930), nel Maschio Angioino; ancora a Milano (marzo 1931), nella Sala delle Statue del Castello Sforzesco; a Parigi (aprile 1931), al Museo dello Jeu-de-Paume, alle Tuileries; e a Ravenna (settembre 1967), nei chiostri della Basilica di san Francesco; per non parlare degli altri centri italiani: Biella, Asti, Padova, Vicenza, Verona, Como, Bergamo, Brescia, Mantova, Cremona, Piacenza, Palermo e Catania; e dei due stranieri: L'Aia (febbraio 1939) e Nizza (aprile 1939)" (Gizzi 1998a, 48). Gizzi makes no mention of any exhibitions taking place between March 1922 and May 1927, which suggests that during that time Nattini was focused on creating his illustrations and organizing the production of his luxury edition of the *Commedia* rather than displaying his work. Smaller, less noteworthy exhibitions may have been held at some point in those five years given that Gizzi mentions several events in "altri centri italiani" that go undated, but these may just as well have taken place between 1927 and 1931 or even after this second key moment in the exhibition and reception history of the *Imagini*.

degna della rinnovata coscienza italiana" and the King thanked Nattini for "il grande servigio [*sic*] reso alla Patria" (qtd. in Cassinari 2012, 242). There is a notable shift in the focus of this praise from that of the acclaim elicited by the first few *Imagini* in 1921-1922, as well as in its sources. Whereas Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations originally met mainly with critical awe for the artist's skill coming from well-known journalists, art experts, and Dante scholars, by 1931 Nattini's project increasingly meets with the public approval of high-ranking officials who commend not the work *per se* but rather what it represents politically within a national framework. Most interesting in this regard are the King's and the Duce's comments, in which the focus is displaced from the commended work to a new object, be it the fatherland to which the work is a 'service' or the 'renewed Italian conscience' of which the work is deemed worthy.

Mussolini in particular seems to have taken a personal interest in the *Imagini dantesche* by the 1930s, promoting and endorsing the project's first exhibition beyond Italy's borders in April 1931 in Paris.[35] Held at the Jeu-de-Paume museum in the Tuileries gardens, courtesy of the French government, the Parisian exhibition of Nattini's recently completed *Inferno* illustrations marks the climax of Nattini's time in the critical spotlight.[36] The event was orchestrated by an Italian-French committee comprising government officials and important figures belonging to the art scene of both countries and presided by Albert Besnard, a member of both the Académie Française and the Académie des Beaux-Arts. The exhibition was jointly inaugurated on April 21, 1931, by Maurice Petsche, the French Minister of Fine Arts, and Count Gaetano Manzoni, in his function as Italian ambassador to France. The sheer volume of visitors, however, constrained museum curator André Dezarrois to delay the official inauguration of the exhibition by several hours, as Petsche was unable to reach the first-floor salon by the originally designated time to give his speech. Interest in Nattini's *Imagini dantesche* was indeed so great that the French administration of national museums was obliged to suspend the sale of tickets to the exhibition in order to thin out the crowds around the displayed paintings, a measure Gizzi notes was unprecedented; the French Ministry of Fine Arts was further obliged to extend the duration of the exhibition by ten days.

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[35] Unless otherwise indicated, the following account of the Paris exhibition of the *Imagini dantesche* is based on the descriptions provided in Gizzi 1998a (49-50) and Depalmi 2007 (31).

[36] Indeed, the extensive coverage of this particular exhibition in scholarship detailing the exhibition and reception history of the *Imagini dantesche* (see, especially, Gizzi 1998a and Depalmi 2007, but also Cassinari 2012) suggests that it far outstrips all exhibitions of the *Imagini* preceding and following it in terms of importance and scope.

Amidst the throng of visitors flocking to the exhibition for its inauguration were many high-profile political and cultural personages who were likely specially invited to attend. Government officials present included the General Henri Gouraud, Military Governor of Paris, as well as Albert Lebrun, representing the French Senate, and the Belgian and Polish ambassadors to France. Cultural officials present included representatives from the Académie Française, the Institut de France, the Collège de France, the Sorbonne, the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and multiple French national museums. Gizzi notes that Luigi Pirandello was also in attendance, as were a large number of journalists, painters, sculptors, and art critics from around the world, many of whom, from Gizzi's, Depalmi's, and Cassinari's accounts, had but high praise to bestow. Cassinari reports that Nattini's thirty-four *Inferno* watercolours were greeted enthusiastically by the public and were discussed favourably in a plethora of articles in both French and Italian newspapers and magazines (Cassinari 2012, 242); she cites as an example an article by Jean d'Ivray, who wrote in the weekly publication *Le Miroir du Monde* on May 2, 1931, that "Amos Nattini, hier inconnu, a du premier coup conquis le public de Paris, comme déjà il a su gagner à sa cause les amateurs d'art de son pays" (*ibid*, 247n36). Gizzi in turn points to Pierre de Nolhac's preface to the exhibition catalogue in which,

> dopo aver lodato la ricca fantasia dell'artista e la sua tecnica perfetta, [de Nolhac] proseguiva affermando che, 'le *Imagini dantesche* sono il tentativo più grandioso compiuto per rendere in tutta la loro angoscia le prime scene del Divino Poema. Estraneo ad ogni forma di scuola e d'Accademia, Nattini si è formato con lo studio diretto della natura vivente. I suoi acquerelli prodigiosi lo avvicinano ai grandi maestri del Rinascimento' (Gizzi 1998a, 50).

The incredible cosmopolitan success of the Jeu-de-Paume exhibition seems to have consolidated Nattini's claim to fame, but a closer look at the account of the exhibition as I have reconstructed it above reveals that the exhibition achieved, and was intended to achieve, much more. Given Mussolini's direct involvement in the promotion of the event and the suggestive presence of multiple public officials for its inauguration, it is probable that the exhibition was invested with the implicit political aim of strengthening and increasing Fascist Italy's international cultural capital to establish an 'empire of influence' (Choate 2008).[37] In a way, the

[37] For further discussion of this concept, see especially chapters 2 ("The Great Ethnographic Empire") and 4 ("The Language of Dante").

hyperbolic presentation of Nattini as a self-taught prodigy in de Nolhac's preface inscribes the painter with Italy's new Fascist values: it completely dissociates him from (moribund) pre-Fascist institutions in order to proclaim him as 'self-made,' connected to the 'real' (living) world and producing great works replete with a specifically Italic virtuosity. From this perspective, Nattini's success at the Jeu-de-Paume is Fascism's success, and there is something playfully suggestive (whether intentionally or not) in d'Ivray's comment that Nattini has 'conquered' the Parisian public.

As with any artist shown great favour, there were of course those who questioned Nattini's merit, but their objections, whether based on literary-aesthetic preferences or mere petulance, do not seem to have been significant enough to turn the tide of approval and critical acclaim away from Nattini or his *Imagini*.[38] Interest in Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* on the part of the regime and Italian social and cultural elites appears continuous from 1931 to 1939, especially considering the honours Nattini receives throughout the 1930s: nomination for the first iteration of the Mussolini Art Prize in 1931 (Gizzi 1998a, 52)[39]; inclusion as a title-entry in a volume of the *Enciclopedia Italiana* in 1934 (the entry specifying that his *Commedia* "è edita (1934) fino al ventesimo canto del Purgatorio [*sic*]"; *EI* vol. XXIV, 304); and nomination to the Accademia delle Belle Arti di Parma in 1937 as well as invitation to form part of the Collegio degli Accademici di Merito dell'Accademia Ligustica di Belle Arti di Genova in 1938 (Gizzi 1998a, 53-56). A copy of Nattini's *Inferno* was even allegedly gifted to Adolf Hitler in 1937 by the Italian ambassador to Germany on the occasion of an exhibition on nineteenth-century Italian

[38] In the sources currently available to me, only Corrado Gizzi (1998a) reports some of the criticisms aimed at Nattini and his *Imagini dantesche*. The only detractor Gizzi bothers to name, however, is Pietro Maria Bardi, whose objection to the copious acclaim Nattini received for his illustrated *Commedia* is better understood as snobbish gatekeeping: likely targeting Ugo Ojetti, Nattini's most ardent and vocal supporter with whom Bardi entertained a rivalry, as much as the Genoese painter himself, Bardi snidely remarked that an artist is only great "quando in suo favore ragionano gli artisti *autentici* e critici d'arte *veri*" (52; my emphasis). Of the criticisms Gizzi reports from unnamed sources, it appears that while Nattini was generally hailed for his artistic skill and exegetical prowess, some still faulted the painter for having 'misunderstood' Dante in some of his aesthetic and compositional choices (such as his preference for representing the global scene over individual character portraits) and others were disconcerted by his "precisione microscopica di miniaturista" and uncomfortable with his "puntiglio anatomico." Still others held against Nattini his refusal to follow current artistic trends; overall, however, it seems that the voices of approval and critical acclaim, especially amongst the cultured social elite and the politically influential, generally drowned out those who expressed less favourable judgements on Nattini's art.

[39] Gizzi notes that Nattini was nominated along with Mario Sironi and was in fact the favourite for the prize, but that due to 'heated polemical debate' in the newspapers neither nominee received it; the award went instead to Ildebrando Pizzetti, "con sorpresa di tutti" (Gizzi 1998a, 52). Gizzi does not go into further detail than this, leaving the reader to wonder what the nature of the debate was and why the announcement of Pizzetti as prize-winner 'surprised all.'

art held in Berlin (Bardazzi 2012, 42; Cassinari 2012, 247n37), which attests to the high symbolic value ascribed to Nattini's work by Fascism.

Nattini's success does seem to plateau after the 1931 Paris exhibition of his *Inferno*, however, as little if any fanfare appears to have greeted the completion of his *Purgatorio* in 1936 or his *Paradiso* in 1941. The last pre-WWII exhibitions take place in 1939, with two of these taking place abroad, one on February 27 in the Reale Sala Kleykamp in The Hague, which was organized by the Dutch chapter of the Società Dante Alighieri, and the other, later in the year (exact date unknown), at the Libreria italiana della Società Studi Danteschi in Nice, where forty of Nattini's lithographs were displayed alongside exemplars of the printed volumes of the first two canticles (Gizzi 1998a, 53).[40] The next exhibition would only take place nearly thirty years later, in Ravenna on September 17, 1967, as part of the celebrations for the seven hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth (Gizzi 1998a, 56). By then, however, interest in both Nattini and his *Commedia* illustrations had waned: as journalist Fabio Isman writes, after the Second World War Nattini retreated to a life of solitude in Oppiano where he painted for himself rather than for media attention, whereby "Si fa dimenticare, e viene dimenticato" (Isman 2015, 38).

3.2. Appropriating the Imagini

I suspect that one of the reasons Nattini 'came to be forgotten' in the postwar after his incredible success during the interwar period is precisely the close connection between his *Imagini dantesche* and Fascism, which first through Valdameri's financing and later Mussolini's endorsement co-opted Nattini's illustration project for cultural imperialist purposes. Interest in Nattini's oeuvre prior to the start of the Second World War, after all, appears to have remained constant and vocal, especially as of the 1930s and particularly on the part of Fascist public officials and institutions: as Emanuele Bardazzi reports, the regime "plaudì a ogni esposizione del monumentale lavoro di Nattini, *impossessandosi del nome di Dante a fini retorici e pattriotici*" (Bardazzi 2012, 42; my emphasis). Yet after the war, Nattini curiously slips into complete oblivion from which recent criticism has only partially restored him by writing about his *Imagini* without acknowledging, and sometimes outright erasing, their ties to Fascism.[41]

[40] Gizzi does not specify, however, which forty lithographs were displayed or whether any were from the yet unfinished *Paradiso* volume on which Nattini would have been working at this time.

[41] Corrado Gizzi, for instance, silently omits the Roman numeral at the end of the publication date in his transcription of each of Nattini's *Commedia* volume colophons (Gizzi 1998b 115-116), and Fabio Isman (2015) and

The close connection between Fascism and the *Imagini* as well as its significance, however, emerges in full light if we consider documentary evidence of Nattini's illustrations from the interwar period, such as Mattia Limoncelli's speech inaugurating the 1930 exhibition of the *Imagini* at the Maschio Angioino in Naples.[42] The conclusion to this speech in particular offers a compact example of the several ways in which Fascism used exhibitions of Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations, and the eventual dissemination of the volumes in which they feature, as opportunities to lay the groundwork for an informal empire of influence and to consolidate the construction of a properly Fascist Italian culture.

Not much is readily available on Mattia Limoncelli (1880-1966).[43] Aside from being president of the Accademia di Belle Arti of Naples (exact tenure unknown) at the time he gave his speech on the *Imagini*, the Salerno-born lawyer and poet was also a member of parliament during the XXVIII legislature of the Kingdom of Italy from April 20, 1929, to January 19, 1934, as part of the Fascist parliamentary group. The conclusion to his address at the Maschio Angioino demonstrates two key things of interest for this study: it shows Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* being clearly presented as a tool of cultural imperialism by an official of the Fascist government; and it exemplifies how Fascism saw and sought to appropriate Dante by twisting his writings and arrogating for itself the religious aura of the *Commedia*.

Limoncelli begins his closing remarks with a call back to the opening of his speech: "Vogliate consentire nel chiudere queste osservazioni che io mi richiami ad un concetto espresso nell'inizio: l'importanza nazionale ed il significato di quest'opera" (Limoncelli 1930, 14). The concept of 'national importance' and the 'significance of Nattini's work' is only alluded to in the opening of the inaugural address, where Limoncelli refers to Nattini as taking up "un compito così grave da impensierire" and a few sentences later quotes King Vittorio Emanuele's 1927

Carla Mazzarelli (2015b), amongst others, seem to feel a compulsive need to specify that Nattini aided or at least sympathized with the partigiani during the Resistance in 1943-1945, as if to justify or excuse the painter and their own interest in his work.

[42] The Harvard University Library marks its printed booklet of this speech, which I have consulted for this analysis, as published in 1920. According to Gizzi and other critics, however, the exhibit at the Maschio Angioino, where the frontmatter of the booklet specifies this speech was given, took place in March 1930. Given the number of watercolours Limoncelli refers to as completed in his speech and that I have not found mention of an earlier exhibit at the Maschio Angioino in the literature available, I have opted to refer to the speech as given in 1930 rather than 1920.

[43] The information that follows has been scraped together from blurb-length articles and meta-data catalogue entries from the following sources: Camera dei deputati: Portale Storico n.d.; Wikipedia 2020; Library of Congress 2013; dati.camera.it 2014 and 2015.

comment that to complete "questa eccelsa opera d'arte è un grande servizio reso alla Patria" (*ibid*, 5-6; quotation italicized in original); in closing, however, the notion of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* as nationally important is emphatically foregrounded, introduced after a colon which creates a solemn pause in the middle of the sentence.

This pause sets the tone for the fervent affirmation of Fascist piety toward Italian culture that will follow, a piety that the very end of the speech mobilizes as a quasi-religious patriotism in the service of Fascism's cultural imperialist aspirations. The 'grave duty' to which Limoncelli hints in the very first sentence of his address here takes on a whole new meaning, the delivery of which Limoncelli delays for maximum rhetorical impact, even within the conclusion, so that it becomes explicit only in the closing call to action:

> Onoriamo le nostre glorie, diffondiamone la conoscenza nel mondo.
>
> *Ogni gesto d'arte*, ogni ardimento *vale assai più di qualsiasi propaganda*.
>
> Pensiamo che quando l'orchestra di Toscanini esegue la nostra musica all'estero compie in un'ora di gioia un'opera di penetrazione che nessun'altra può uguagliare;
>
> pensiamo che quando il Duca delle Puglie porta più oltre i confini del nostro dominio dà al nostro valore una solenne riconferma;
>
> pensiamo che quando un quadro, una statua, *un volume* si affacciano sull'orizzonte d'un altro paese *è come un lembo della nostra bandiera che si solleva per la nostra fede e per il nostro orgoglio* (*ibid*, 14-15; my emphasis).

Only in these last three sentences does Limoncelli finally specify why Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* bears national importance: the 'service' the work provides for the fatherland, to borrow the King's phrasing, is that it contributes to the expansion of an informal empire.

The idea of establishing an informal empire has pre-Fascist precedent in Italy's colonial history, although Fascism developed it with greater fervour in its quest to make Italy a world leader able to surpass its more successful European neighbours. Mark Choate, in his 2008 monograph *Emigrant Nation*, provides a detailed overview of liberal Italy's attempts to corral its expatriate communities, especially (although not exclusively) in the United States, Brazil, and Argentina, into informal 'ethnographic colonies' through which it could expand an empire of influence of similar power to the medieval maritime republics of Venice and Genoa. Choate notes that the Italian government's failures in Eritrea and Ethiopia at the turn of the twentieth century disenchanted many Italians with the country's more traditional colonial ventures, leading

to an increased (if somewhat fickle) interest in cultivating the loyalty of Italian emigrants by supporting expatriate communities and thus creating a global network from which Italy sought to reap commercial benefits and increase its international prestige (and thus power of influence over other nations). The principle means through which Italy sought to secure this was through language and culture, both of which were promoted in expatriate communities in order to prevent their assimilation into their host communities with the not-so-subtle intention of keeping emigrants loyal only to their home country. As Choate amply demonstrates, however, this intention was not lost on the countries to which Italians emigrated, and in many places it fostered a barrier of mistrust between Italian migrants and their host communities who became suspicious of the migrants' motivations for leaving their home to work abroad.

The idea of an informal 'empire of influence' nonetheless informed much of Fascist Italy's cultural and international policy during the *ventennio* insofar as it constituted a more realistic alternative to traditional territorial expansion for an aspiring colonial power that had neither the resources nor the international influence to establish, maintain, and defend lucrative colonies. Mussolini's definition of empire in his exposition of Fascist doctrine in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* (entry published in 1932) is in this regard quite telling, as he explicitly states that an empire "non è soltanto un'espressione territoriale o militare o mercantile, *ma spirituale o morale*. Si può pensare a un impero, cioè a una nazione che direttamente o indirettamente guida le altre nazioni, *senza bisogno di conquistare un solo chilometro quadrato di territorio*" (*EI* vol. XIV, 851; my emphasis). Mobilizing Italian culture was one of the ways Fascism sought to proclaim Italy's superiority to other nations, particularly in North Africa and the Balkans, and therefore its right to rule them. Until the mid-1930s at least, Fascism and Mussolini thus touted the possibility of Italy establishing a 'moral empire' over the rest of the world, seeking out alternative routes to achieve their imperial designs.

Limoncelli's presentation of art as a mean to conquer foreign lands in his call to action puts into practise the vision of the Italian empire Mussolini theorized Fascism would build. As an impressive cultural product copies of which would be featured in elite private and institutional collections in Italy and abroad, Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* thus becomes, from the regime's perspective, a heightened form of tacit propaganda 'spreading the knowledge of Italian glory throughout the world' that could be folded into Fascist cultural imperialist designs. The 'Italian glory' Limoncelli calls upon his addressees to honour is, moreover, not to be understood

exclusively as past glory (e.g., Dante with his *Commedia* carving out an important place for Italy in the canon of world literature) but also, and perhaps especially, *present* glory (e.g., Italian cultural production and exportation under Fascism).

Indeed, in the last sentence of Limoncelli's speech it is primarily present-day 'glories' that are called to mind, with a particular stress on how those glories can be understood as acts of conquest performed in the service of Fascist imperial aspirations. The military imagery that organizes the final sentence is not only metaphorical: Limoncelli effectively sandwiches an approving reference to Prince Amedeo Savoy-Aosta's involvement in the colonial reconquest of the Fezzan region of Libya between two references to the global dissemination of Italian art, an intrusion that serves to blur the line between literal and figurative conquest and thereby imply that the metaphorical conquests effected through cultural exports constitute expansions of the Fascist Italian empire just as real as the actual conquest of new territory.[44] The suggestion of parity between literal and figurative conquest is made all the stronger by the anaphoric structure of the sentence which, with its emphatic repetition of "pensiamo che quando" tying together three independent clauses, compels the listeners to adopt the speaker's way of thinking.

The parallelism in the structure of the three clauses combined with Limoncelli's organizing military imagery further creates a crescendo effect that mimics the momentum of successful conquest. Each clause thus represents one step in an over-arching process of claiming a new colony: infiltration of the new territory; combat to subdue its original inhabitants; and symbolic affirmation of success. Interestingly, the phrasing of the three clauses seems to suggest that metaphorical conquest is more effective, and therefore more 'real,' than actual conquest. In the first clause, for instance, the concerts conducted by Arturo Toscanini around the world are presented as *unmatchable* acts of penetration ("un'opera di penetrazione che *nessun'altra può uguagliare*"; my emphasis) as if Toscanini were conducting not an orchestra but a platoon infiltrating its way note by note into foreign cultures in order to bring them under Italian influence. The implication is that this metaphorical invasion is more efficient and more permanent than the literal colonization of Libya to which Limoncelli alludes in the following

[44] The exhibition was inaugurated under the auspices of Prince Amedeo's mother, Princess Hélène of Orléans, Duchess of Aosta (Gizzi 1998a, 49), so the reference to the Prince's colonial ventures may also serve as an act of deference to an important patron. The strategic placement of this mention, however, suggests that this function is secondary to the aims of Limoncelli's call to action.

clause, a 'real' act of conquest that seems mentioned only to collapse the distance between the literal and the figurative.

The real and the metaphorical interweave each other even more intricately in the final clause of Limoncelli's speech, in which one symbol of dominion is substituted with another. Cultural artifacts — paintings, statues, books — are equated with the Italian flag, as if the former were alternate versions of the latter. The central image upon which Limoncelli draws, the raising of a flag, is the symbol of conquest and dominion *par excellence*. This final simile transfers that symbolic association to every single Italian cultural artifact displayed abroad which together mark the expanding borders of Italy's informal 'empire.'

Limoncelli implicitly credits Fascism for the successful expansion of this informal empire by foregrounding the regime's cultural accomplishments in the lead-up to his closing call to action. The series of publications Limoncelli is proud to proclaim mostly completed ("non più soltanto un programma ma già un fatto in gran parte compiuto"; Limoncelli 1930, 14) includes two of Fascism's most important cultural initiatives, the Accademia d'Italia and the *Enciclopedia Italiana*, as examples that demonstrate that Italy is in a period of "indiscutibile risveglio" (*ibid*). This Fascist 're-awakening' of Italian intellect and culture is subtly contrasted with the previous 'Liberal' curation of Italy's cultural heritage when Limoncelli goes on to state that, "Sono ben questi tentativi [the various publication projects enumerated in the previous sentence] che esaltano una generazione assai più che non facciano celebrazioni e mecenatismi destinati a rimanere, *come una volta*, un fatto accademico o parlamentare" (*ibid*; my emphasis). The slight contempt with which Limoncelli characterizes previous cultural celebrations and patronage practices as academic or parliamentary 'facts' (*fatto* as passive noun) suggests that these lacked the vigour proper to Fascist cultural 'acts' (*fatto* as active participle), a vigour the overall ethos of the speech's conclusion implies is necessary and befitting of the grandeur of Italian culture and its historic 'civilizing' mission.

This mission is given a pseudo-religious dimension through Limoncelli's presentation of the importance of Italian culture, and Dante's *Commedia* specifically, by means of Latin Catholic imagery. Limoncelli lays the groundwork for this in the second sentence of his closing remarks when, having just stressed the 'national importance' of Nattini's illustrated edition, he proclaims that "[t]utto quanto contribuisce alla conoscenza del Poema dantesco va compiuto *come un rito*, poichè [*sic*] la Commedia [*sic*] *è la nostra Cattedrale*" (Limoncelli 1930, 14; my

emphasis). Hints of the pseudo-religious context provided in this sentence return, paired with cultural imperialist ideas, in Limoncelli's call to action through the words "conoscenza," "volume," and "fede": Nattini's work is praised for contributing to knowledge of the *Commedia*, and Limoncelli calls on his addressees to spread the knowledge of Italian glory throughout the world; the *Commedia* is a book (or three, depending on the edition), and Limoncelli tells his addressees that any Italian book on foreign soil is like a piece of the Italian flag planted there; the *Commedia* is metaphorically presented as Italy's 'Cathedral,' and Limoncelli claims that Italian cultural artifacts abroad are like Italian banners being raised in foreign lands for Italian faith. The overall effect suggests that the dissemination of Italian culture abroad should be undertaken with a militant piety for the expansion of an informal empire of influence, or 'moral empire' as Mussolini puts it in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* entry on Fascism, which creates an especially apt analogy between cultural imperialist practices and Latin Catholic missionary work and evangelization efforts.

Indeed, Catholicism is arguably the prime and most successful example of cultural imperialism through the ages, the model *par excellence* of the 'spiritual or moral' empire Mussolini describes: to this day, Catholicism and its central institution, the papacy, continue to exert influence over communities worldwide over whom they do not rule directly. Limoncelli, however, is not so much making a simple analogy here as he is appropriating Latin Catholic codes in order to subvert them in the service of Fascist interests. By describing Nattini's work (absorbed in the "Tutto quanto" at the beginning of the sentence) and the *Commedia* itself using Latin Catholic imagery of 'rites' and 'cathedrals,' Limoncelli establishes something of a secular religion by voiding the codes of their original content. The movement from the idea that Nattini's project is of 'national importance' to that of the *Commedia* being Italy's 'Cathedral' occurs over the space of just two sentences, collapsing together secular and religious registers to put the latter in the service of the former. A complex rhetorical strategy is at play whereby church and state appear to become conflated as Limoncelli borrows Latin Catholic imagery and re-contextualizes it to apply to an implied state 'religion' that he anchors in a Fascistized Dante.

The linchpin of this strategy is the substitution of Dante and his *Commedia* for Catholicism, whereby 'real' religion is displaced, its traditional signs emptied of their original signifieds to be filled with new ones more readily co-opted by Fascist interests. This is concisely effected by the movement from simile to metaphor within the short sentence that collapses and

masks the substitution: Nattini's *Imagini dantesche* are 'nationally important' insofar as *like* a(n evangelical) rite they help spread the word of Dante's Poem (*sic*) which *is* Italy's Cathedral (*sic*). The *Commedia* then appears as the sacred text of this new religion and Dante's 'divine poem,' which contains as much politics as theology, provides the perfect cover for the operation, allowing simultaneously the appropriation of a religious aura and the justification of the imperial and cultural projects pursued by the regime, all the while displacing the Catholic Church as the main authority on Italian spirituality and, more specifically, morality. Essentially, Limoncelli draws on a commonplace of Italian life — the ubiquitous presence of the Catholic Church — as a set of rhetorical rails along which he can smoothly wheel a conditioned response of piety toward a new destination, all the while setting up the Fascist regime as a moral authority, in line with the way Fascism thought of itself as Italy's conscience.

3.3. Fascist Cultural Imperialism

As becomes apparent from studies performed by Benjamin George Martin (2005) and Claudio Fogu (2003), Fascism approached the promotion and celebration of Italian culture with the ulterior motive of promoting and celebrating itself and its goals. Cultural and historical icons from Italy's past were thus re-framed and touched-up with a Fascist gloss in order to fit them into the narrative Fascism sought to construct of itself and of its leader as historic agents ushering in the new age of restored Italian glory.

Specifically, Fascism presented itself and Mussolini as the fulfilment of a yearning long expressed by generations of people who called the Italic peninsula home for the (re-)establishment of a strong, unified Italy that could stand as a proud protagonist on the world stage, freed from the shackles of subservience to foreign powers to assert its rightful place as their equal (if not their superior). Martin, for example, in his 2005 article "Celebrating the Nation's Poets: Petrarch, Leopardi, and the Appropriation of Cultural Symbols in Fascist Italy," observes that one of the more direct ways in which the regime associated literary figures in particular with itself was through

> the argument, made with remarkable frequency by speakers at the celebrations and authors of commemorative articles, that the Italy of Fascism was the strong, free Italy of which these authors had dreamed. Long dead cultural figures were thus portrayed as

> would-be supporters of the regime, while the poets themselves took on new significance as 'prophets' of the glory that Italy had achieved through Fascism (196).

Martin goes on to argue that "[t]his oddly ahistorical presentation of historical figures can be seen as part of a larger pattern in the presentation of the Italian cultural tradition under Fascism" (201). Quoting Victoria de Grazia's reflection when she notes that Fascism reduced Italian culture "to a roster of illustrious but essentially static and isolated cultural 'monuments': Dante, Goldoni, Manzoni, Verdi, Puccini, D'Annunzio—an eclectic mixture, united solely by their similar packaging and consistent presentation to the public," Martin concludes that these 'monuments' thus became "decontextualized symbols of Italian cultural greatness, whose historical role was presented—if at all—only as prefigurations of Fascism's final accomplishment of Roman rebirth" (*ibid*).

Fascism used this pantheon of decontextualized icons to establish a typological relationship between the Fascist present and Italy's past. Fogu explains this best in his 2003 monograph *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy*, when, discussing the 1932 celebrations for the *cinquantenario garibaldino*, he argues that

> The ultimate aim of the *cinquantenario*'s representational strategy . . . was nothing short of the radical reversal of the traditional conception of historical consciousness. It was not fascism [*sic*] that gained political legitimacy from an affirmation of continuity with the past. It was that past that gained *presence* and *meaning* only through the signifying word of the historic *signifier* [read: maker of meaning] — the Duce (103; italics original).

While Fogu does not specifically refer to this relationship between Fascist present and Italian past as typological, what he describes above recalls Erich Auerbach's work on the concept of *figura* and figural interpretation (Auerbach 1984). According to Auerbach, the "*figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical" (*ibid*, 29). Figural (or typological) interpretation as it is most commonly understood today comes to us primarily through the early church fathers (Tertullian and Augustine in particular) who held that the Old Testament, "both as a whole and in its most important details, is a concrete historical prefiguration of the Gospel" (*ibid*, 44). That is, the events and persons of the Old Testament are to be interpreted as 'shadows' or 'figures' of the events and persons of the New in which they are 'fulfilled' and the 'truth' they contained is revealed. To put it slightly differently, this means that the Old Testament is 'legitimated' by the New Testament, gaining "*presence* and *meaning*," to

borrow Fogu's words, "only through the signifying word of the historic *signifier*," in this case typically Christ. The Old Testament, or, in Fascism's figural interpretation of Italian history, the pre-Fascist past, is not denied its historicity, but it is interpreted primarily through its constructed typological relationship to the New Testament (or Fascist present), and its meaning or significance is defined by this relationship.

In the case of the *cinquantenario garibaldino* celebrations specifically, Fascism's figural interpretation of its significance emerges clearly as "the organization, performance, and rhetorical encoding of the Garibaldian *cinquantenario* could not have been more subordinated to that of the fascist [*sic*] *decennale*" also celebrated that year (Fogu 2003, 74). Indeed, the *cinquantenario* celebrations seem organized in such a way as to emphasize Fascist reverence toward the Italian past rather than the legacy of that past itself. Structured around the movement of Anita Garibaldi's remains from Genoa to their new resting place on the Janiculum Hill in Rome, where Mussolini had a statue of her erected alongside the statue commemorating her husband, the celebrations took place over three days: first a parade through Genoa, then a parade through Rome, and lastly the official inauguration of the newly erected monument by Mussolini himself.

What is especially interesting about the *cinquantenario* celebrations is that they were staged in such a way as to deny Garibaldianism its continued independent existence in the Fascist present by marking it definitively as part of the pre-Fascist past. Most of the work to firmly and symbolically historicize Garibaldianism and its legacy in this way is effected through the aesthetics of the Genoese parade, which lays the groundwork for the affirmation of the historic presentness of Fascism in the two Roman events (Fogu 2003, 86). Indeed, Fogu reports that, "[r]esponding to Mussolini's express directions, the core of the [Genoese] parade . . . was organized to look like the central room of a Risorgimento museum," and the procession's nineteenth-century funeral aesthetic "determined the reception of this mass spectacle [in local newspapers' accounts] as a Risorgimento museum in motion" (*ibid*). Garibaldian 'past' and Fascist 'present' were meticulously separated within the procession, with the Garibaldians "put on display as *living relics* of Garibaldi's time," framed by the municipal valets dressed in historical uniform before them and the solemn nineteenth-century funeral carriage after them as they rode by on open, horse-drawn carriages, whilst blackshirts and WWI veterans in modern attire brought up the rear (*ibid*; italics original). The ordering of the different parts of the parade

is crucial, and it is no accident that the dividing line between Garibaldian 'past' and Fascist 'present' is the funeral carriage: through the careful staging, the procession constructs a narrative in which Fascism emerges as a historic watershed, a radical break with all that preceded it in Italian history which is now 'dead,' having given way to the Fascist present that, embodied by the blackshirts and WWI veterans closing the procession as well as by the Fascist youth squad which greets it with the *attenti* ritual in front of Genoa's monument to Garibaldi, now pays homage to it, and only in so doing grants it 'presence and meaning' (Fogu 2003, 88).[45] In other words, Fascism, not Garibaldianism, was to decide how the *cinquantenario garibaldino* would be commemorated, because in the narrative Fascism sought to construct of Italian history Garibaldianism belonged to, and was neatly contained within, the nineteenth century. Having grown into its totalitarian nature with the approach of the *decennale*, Fascism no longer tolerated the idea of political collaborators external to itself and so Garibaldianism, which like other nationalist political groups had offered early Fascism its support, had to be put in its place, which is to say in the past, cut off from the Fascist present and celebrated only in its typological relationship to that present.

In sum, Fogu's incisive analysis read alongside Auerbach's work on figural interpretation reveals that Fascism approached Italian history in much the same way that the early church fathers approached salvation history in their figural interpretations of the Bible, molding the 'old' according to the perspective and interests of the 'new' in order to construct a specific narrative. Garibaldians are therefore marked as relics of a bygone age, for instance, and the works of canonical authors such as Petrarch, Leopardi, and — as will be discussed in more depth shortly — Dante are interpreted as proto-Fascist. Fascism's "radical reversal of the traditional conception of historical consciousness" as progress or development, then, is radical in the root sense of returning to an older tradition borrowed from Latin Catholicism, which it appropriates in order to present itself as the 'historic fulfilment' of a history that is significant only insofar as it prefigures the Fascist present (Fogu 2003, 103; see also p. 89).

[45] Fogu notes that "[c]ontrary to the prime fascist [*sic*] ritual known as the *appello* (roll call) — which sought to symbolize a mystical communion among the ritual actor, the onlooking masses, and the honoured martyr — the ritual of the *attenti* codified the very distance between a present that paid homage and a past that received that homage" (88).

3.4. Appropriating Dante

Dante unwittingly lent himself especially well to Fascist re-interpretation along these lines. As Luigi Scorrano amply demonstrates in his essay entitled "Il Dante 'fascista'" (2001), the cryptic prophecies through which the medieval poet voices his yearning for a strong and morally upright leader to come and 'set Italy straight' in the *Commedia* were only too easy to read as referring to Mussolini, and Dante's open admiration for an idealized Roman Empire as well as his hard stance on the Church having no business meddling in temporal affairs were just as easily co-opted in support of Fascism's imperial aspirations and totalitarian nature.[46] To cite just a few of Scorrano's examples, Domenico Fazioli, self-proclaimed "camicia nera antemarcia," in a speech given in 1936 expounds his interpretation of Dante's "cinquecento diece e cinque" prophecy (*Purg*. XXXIII, lines 37-51) as referring to the 'DUX' of Fascism insofar as Dante 'names' his "*messo di Dio*, il riformatore d'Italia" a DXV (515 in Roman numerals) or 'DUX' (the 'U' and 'V' being equivalent in ancient Rome) and 'DUX' is the name by which the Italian people have 'baptized' Mussolini (Fazioli qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 112; italics original); Giacomo Franchi, for his part, in a book published in 1928 equates "l'avvento del forte Capo del Fascismo" with "l'avvento del Veltro provvidenziale" announced in *Inferno* I, lines 91-111 (Franchi qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 113), a sentiment Eugenio De Carlo shares in an impassioned speech given in 1929 ("E non sembra anche a voi che l'Italia, governata ora dal Fascismo, che ha contenuto e caratteristiche imperiali, ed è imperniato in un Uomo che ne regge le sorti, all'ombra del Littorio di Roma, con *sapienza, amore e virtute*, e che è nato precisamente tra Feltro e Feltro in questa fatidica Romagna, sia l'Italia divinata e sospirata da Dante?"; De Carlo qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 106n44 [italics original]). Others, such as Tommaso Vitti and Ferruccio Rizzelli, combine both prophecies together, noting that the Veltro and DXV are incarnated in Mussolini (Vitti, in 1934) and that "[c]osì la profezia del I canto dell'Inferno [*sic*] e quella dell'ultimo del Purgatorio [*sic*] s'integrano a vicenda" (Rizzelli, in 1936; see Scorrano 2001, 113 and 112n56 respectively).

Still others broaden the purview of their re-interpretations to include other sections of the *Commedia*, as well as other well-known Dantean works such as the *De Monarchia*. Emilio Bodrero, for instance, claims in 1931 that "solo oggi noi possiamo comprendere Dante Italiano e Imperiale, perché tale è il Fascismo di Benito Mussolini, Italiano e Imperiale" and that

[46] For more on the Fascist appropriation of Dante, see also Stefano Albertini's 1996 article, "Dante in camicia nera: uso e abuso del divino poeta nell'Italia fascista."

"[n]ell'unità fascista . . . è già il principio dell'attuazione di quel sogno che Dante vagheggia nei tre sesti canti delle tre cantiche" (Bodrero qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 104). Arrigo Solmi similarly argues in 1935 that the *De Monarchia* ought to be interpreted through the lens of Fascist politics as, barring "qualche eco di forme medioevali," Dante's treatise describes an ideal form of government and relationship between church and state that Fascism has successfully actualized through the Lateran Pacts of 1929 (Solmi qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 102). Some even take their re-interpretations a step further to claim that Dante 'was a Fascist,' such as Pietro Jacopini who argued in an essay published in 1928 that "[c]he Dante sia Fascista lo dimostrano tutte le sue opere, costantemente improntate a un senso di profondo amore per la Patria e di sincero rispetto per le autorità e per le leggi" (Jacopini qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 92).

I could list countless other examples of a Fascistized Dante making appearances in Fascist speeches and writings — Scorrano certainly does — but this sampling suffices to illustrate the point. Scorrano himself notes that these examples and others like them would not be of much interest "se nella loro piatta uniformità non mostrassero come tutto, anche temi nobili come la figura e l'opera di Dante, potesse essere mortificato ed asservito alla esaltazione del duce" (Scorrano 2001, 111). This is not to say that Dante was exclusively interpreted along firmly partisan lines during the *ventennio*, and Scorrano makes a point of noting that the "dantisti 'di professione,'" even those who sympathized with Fascism, were less inclined to the kind of bombastic statements made by people like Fazioli, Franchi, De Carlo, Vitti, Rizzelli, Bodrero, Solmi, or Jacopini (*ibid*, 105). Indeed, Scorrano specifies that scholars such as Michele Barbi, Luigi Pietrobono, Bruno Nardi, and Nicola Zingarelli 'kept their distances' from explicitly Fascist interpretations of Dante and were therefore able to continue their studies without political interference by proceeding 'cautiously,' "forse talvolta confondendo un poco le carte. Se si parlava di Roma [for example] si poteva tenersi in equilibrio riuscendo a parlarne in modo di non tradire Dante ed, eventualmente, in modo da non dispiacere ad ascoltatori pronti all'interpretazione politica anche di parole innocenti" (*ibid*). That is, scholars could write their arguments ambiguously enough to not foreclose a Fascist interpretation of Dante and his works without having to voice those interpretations themselves, thus walking a fine line between respecting the integrity of their object of study and keeping the regime happy.

A good example of this balancing act at play is Barbi's entry on Dante written in 1931 for the *Enciclopedia Italiana*. In general, the lengthy entry does justice to the richness and variety of

Dante's life and works, but there are certain passages in which Barbi is evidently "confondendo le carte" if not outright catering to a Fascist audience. One such passage emerges in the discussion of the *De Monarchia* treatise, where Barbi plays a careful game of cat and mouse when commenting on Dante's and his fellow Florentines' opposing political stances regarding the legitimacy of German King Henry VII's authority over Italy as the Holy Roman Emperor, which the former approved and the latter rejected:

> Maraviglioso è senza dubbio l'ardimento dei concittadini del poeta per assicurare la conquista lenta e progressiva fatta dai comuni italiani della propria autonomia. Ma non è senza giustificazione neppure il modo di vedere di D. esule, se si ripensi allo stato politico dell'Italia, travagliata dalle guerre e dalle lotte intestine, che faceva rassomigliarla 'a nave senza nocchiero in gran tempesta.' Il nocchiero non poteva essere se non un'autorità superiore a tutti che dominasse i flutti degli odî e delle cupidigie, e conciliasse nella sua imparzialità i contrastanti interessi, sedendo arbitro fra le città e i partiti in lotta fra loro. Respingere l'imperatore era allontanare il tutore della giustizia e della pace nelle città e fra le città; era voler essere servi di tirannie sia principesche sia oligarchiche sia democratiche, invece d'aspirare a quella libertà e a quella sicurezza che ogni cittadino di stato ben ordinato ha nei limiti e col patrocinio della legge (Barbi 1931).[47]

Barbi here delicately balances praise and critique of both perspectives in such a way as to facilitate the Fascistization of Dante's arguments in the *De Monarchia* without making any explicit analogies *à la* Solmi. The passage is of particular interest as one of the few in which Barbi's voice as commentator is audible, and the phrasing and language are suggestive of an underlying tension between Barbi's scholarly desire to respect the integrity of his object of study and his citizenly desire to either placate Fascist expectations or possibly reconcile the *De Monarchia* with his political views as a Fascist sympathizer.[48] Thus he praises Dante's adversaries for their 'daring' in fighting to secure Italian autonomy from foreign rule, which in turn tempers and contextualizes the defense of Dante that comes in to subvert that praise by suggesting that while Dante would have welcomed a non-Italian Holy Roman Emperor this was

[47] Under "*Monarchia*," sub-section under "Opere minori."
[48] I have not found concrete traces of Barbi's political views, but it is worth noting, as Scorrano does, that Barbi "fu membro aggregato per la Classe delle scienze morali e storiche della Reale Accademia d'Italia [a Fascist institution] e che nel 1935 ebbe un Premio Mussolini" (Scorrano 2001, 96n23), which suggests that he was more inclined to work with rather than against the regime.

because the Italy of his time lacked an over-arching authority figure who would have freed it from the plethora of 'princely, oligarchic, *and democratic* tyrannies' to which its citizens insisted on being subservient rather than aspiring "a quella libertà e a quella sicurezza che ogni cittadino di stato ben ordinato ha nei limiti e col patrocinio della legge." The allusion to early twentieth-century Italian politics emerges clearly, as does its Fascist bias: the medieval Florentines' rejection of foreign rule easily recalls the discourse of the modern *irredentisti* who wanted to assert Italian rule over ethnically Italian lands in the north of the peninsula, and the phrase "tirannie . . . democratiche" provides a subtle and concise jab against pre-Fascist governments, which invites the association of the emperor, "tutore della giustizia e della pace," with Mussolini, and of the "stato ben ordinato" with Fascist Italy.

'Fascistization-friendly' passages pepper Barbi's discussion of the *Commedia* later in the entry as well, although less in terms of constructing analogies between medieval past and Fascist present and more in the sense of establishing a clear hierarchy of themes, whereby the political or temporal elements of the poem are insistently foregrounded and all else seemingly subordinated to them. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his commentary on Dante's understanding of virtue and salvation, pulling the medieval poet's views on why evil exists as they appear in his verse in a more modern direction reminiscent of, and better suited to, the ethos of Fascism. The passage in question follows a discussion of Dante as a 'true Christian,' and it comes in to reframe that discussion as if to firmly preclude any interpretation of the *Commedia* that engages too critically with the religious views Dante expresses in the poem that either conflict with or do not fully correspond to Fascist values:

> Però esser cristiano, ripetiamolo ancora, non vuol dire rinnegare l'umanità: al contrario, è intendere meglio la nobiltà di questa creatura divina, e il fine per cui Dio la creò, che è d'acquistare per merito proprio, nella milizia terrena, la gloria di vivere eternamente con lui. *C'è il male sulla terra, e deve esserci, ché senza il pericolo, senza la lotta non c'è ragione di meritare. Il maggior dono che Dio abbia fatto all'uomo è il libero volere, e questo non potrebbe esercitarsi senza essere esposto continuamente al rischio; anzi più sarà trascinato dalle forze contrarie verso il male, e più avrà campo di mostrare la sua virtù.* D. si trova a vivere in un'età ove tutto trascina alla perdizione: *sì può dire un momento propizio per una coscienza eroica*. E l'uomo familiare della filosofia, il cittadino dall'animo fermo al "ben fare," non solo non s'accascia, ma sente di poter

> mostrare con l'esempio che, *in ogni condizione, l'uomo è fattore del suo destino*, che la perfezione e la felicità non può essere *se non conquista nostra* attraverso a tutti gli ostacoli che la vita ci oppone (Barbi 1931; my emphasis).[49]

Barbi's interpretation of Dante's views here is not entirely wrong, but it certainly misrepresents how Dante feels about the existence of evil as can be gleaned from the *Commedia*. If his bitter words condemning Eve in *Purgatorio* XXIX (lines 22-30) are of any indication, Dante views evil as an unfortunate by-product of the fall from grace that humanity must now contend with, not a virtue-proving necessity that "deve esserci" and much less a normal and accepted state of affairs. I do not mean to suggest that Dante disagrees with the function Barbi ascribes to evil in a fallen world; however, it should be noted that the emphasis on the necessity of moral struggle to 'prove one's virtuousness' is a modernization, as is the idea of humans being in complete control of their destinies. The phrasing indeed recalls Mussolini's elaboration of the doctrine of Fascism for the *Enciclopedia* far more than it aligns with the views expressed in Dante's *Commedia*: compare the above quotation, for instance, to Mussolini's statement that Fascism "[c]oncepisce la vita come lotta, pensando che spetti all'uomo conquistarsi quella che sia veramente degna di lui, creando prima di tutto in sé stesso lo strumento (fisico, morale, intellettuale) per edificarla" (Mussolini 1932).[50] Thus does Barbi once again appear to be "confondendo le carte," stretching Dante's text into a more modern "Fascist-friendly" interpretive direction all the while being careful not to stray too far from the source so that the integrity of the work is not lost.

This level of nuance, however, seems for the most part exclusive to the restricted circle of Dante scholars, as beyond the academic sphere the medieval poet and his works were symbolic means to an end rather than an end in themselves. Concern with preserving their integrity was thus typically low, as the main focus of discourses on (or referencing) Dante and of celebrations of the poet during the *ventennio* was not really Dante but Fascism and, more often than not, Mussolini specifically, with Dante serving merely as a 'pretext' (Scorrano 2001, 109). We see this to a degree in Limoncelli's speech at the Maschio Angioino discussed earlier as well as in the many examples of Fascistized interpretations of Dante's works which serve to show the greatness of Fascism rather than provide further insights into a canonical oeuvre. An even starker example is the 1936 inauguration of the *zona dantesca* in Ravenna, which epitomizes what

[49] Under "*Dante nel suo poema*," sub-section under "La Divina Commedia"
[50] Under "*Idee fondamentali*," subsection under "Dottrina."

Scorrano describes as a widespread and "sostanziale disinteresse — fuori dell'ambito degli studi specialistici — per la figura e l'opera di Dante" (Scorrano 2001, 93). While nominally inaugurated as a 'Dante' space, Giuseppe Frignani's speech on the occasion suggests that the space is significant primarily because of its ties to Mussolini and the rise of Fascism rather than because it houses Dante's tomb. The excerpt of the speech that Scorrano reproduces in his essay makes this especially evident:

> Nei giorni in cui ricorreva il sesto centenario della morte, il 12 settembre 1921, Dante ebbe, fra le vanità dei riti ufficiali e degl'incensi letterari, la mediocrità delle speculazioni di parte e di setta, un omaggio inatteso.
>
> Dalle terre attraverso cui il Po discende all'Adriatico "per aver pace coi seguaci sui," marciando a piedi, come fanti alla guerra, per le strade solatìe della Romagna, giungevano coorti animose, alzando sui neri gagliardetti i fasci di Roma.
>
> Migliaia di giovani, ordinati ed armati, sfilavano davanti alla tomba; Dante accolse il loro grido, veemente e possente: "A Roma."
>
> Un anno dopo la meta invocata era raggiunta, e da Roma Mussolini iniziava la sua opera prodigiosa di costruttore d'impero (Giuseppe Frignani qtd. in Scorrano 2001, 124).

The emphasis here could not be more clearly on Fascism, turning the designation *zona dantesca* into a bit of a misnomer as what is considered significant about the space is its role as a symbolic stop on the itinerary of the March on Rome. Dante and his tomb are effectively just a pretext, and the inauguration of an area of reverence to the medieval poet a performative re-enactment of a moment of reverence that allegedly took place fifteen years prior. In other words, what is being commemorated here is not Dante's tomb but Mussolini's passage in front of the tomb with his followers — the presence of the tomb just provided a convenient opportunity for symbolically charged pomp and solemnity.

3.5. The Danteum

The *zona dantesca* was far from the only architectonic Dante project used as a pretext to celebrate Fascism and Mussolini, and before returning to Nattini's *Imagini* specifically I would like to make one last detour to examine the projected but never-built Danteum. The Danteum is especially interesting to this study, and an appropriate close to this chapter, as it is both a summative example of all that has been discussed in the previous two sections as well as another

of Rino Valdameri's pet projects (Tambling 1997; Kallis 2011; Kallis 2014; Emelianova 2015b; Albarello 2016). Valdameri even used the occasion of gifting Nattini's *Purgatorio* to Mussolini as an opportunity to secure an audience with the Fascist leader to pitch the Danteum project to him (Emelianova 2015b, 33). Taking a closer look at the well-documented Fascistization of Dante in the plans for the Danteum may thus provide further insight into the Fascistization of the *Imagini*, allowing us to understand the importance of Nattini's project as it is claimed, appropriated, and supported by the Fascist regime as well as demonstrating how the *Commedia* is to a point re-written to fit within the regime's rhetoric, an operation of ideological adjustment of the same kind that can be detected in the final illustration of Nattini's *Inferno*.

Overseen by an official body created specifically for the project by Valdameri (Kallis 2011, 77), and intended for completion in time for the E 42 universal exhibition planned in Rome for 1942 as a celebration of twenty years of Fascism (Albarello 2016, 104; Tambling 1997, 127), the Danteum was commissioned to the Rationalist architects Pietro Lingeri and Giuseppe Terragni, who further enlisted the aid of modernist artist Mario Sironi for the design of the building's external decoration (Kallis 2011, 77; Kallis 2014, 143). Valdameri secured funding for the project from Milanese industrialist Alessandro Poss, who pledged two million *lire* (today roughly 1.9 million CAD)[51] for the building's construction (Tambling 1997, 127), and rallied official support for the Danteum from a diverse cast of influential persons, including Giovanni Gentile and Ugo Ojetti, in order to "shield the Danteum from possible attacks concerning the 'modernist' credentials of its two architects" (Kallis 2011, 77; Kallis 2014, 143). By late 1938, Lingeri and Terragni had produced detailed plans which they continued to refine in 1939, following Mussolini's "enthusiastic endorsement" voiced at an initial meeting between all parties involved in the project in Palazzo Venezia in November 1938 (*ibid*); however, the favourable outcome of this meeting notwithstanding, "there was little tangible further progress, in spite of Valdameri's incessant efforts and the two architects' advanced preparation of the drawings," and by September 1939 Mussolini's secretariat put the project on hold indefinitely, to be resumed "in miglior tempo" (Kallis 2014, 144; see also Kallis 2011, 78).

Aristotle Kallis notes that the timing, "rather than any financial considerations or misgivings about the style of the project," was likely the most significant factor in the regime's

[51] This is another approximation based on the results obtained via Professor Rodney Evinsson's "Historical Currency Converter" (see footnote 15 on page 11).

decision to suspend further work on the Danteum (Kallis 2011, 78), although the chosen location — in the heart of Rome's historic centre — may have also presented its own set of impediments (Kallis 2014; Albarello 2016). The site in question, an irregularly shaped lot at the intersection of the recently opened Via dell'Impero (today Via dei Fori Imperiali) and Via Cavour, across from the Basilica of Maxentius on the one street and the Torre dei Conti on the other, and within a few blocks of the Colosseum (see map in fig. 3.4, constructed using the information found in: Emelianova 2015b, 33; Albarello 2016, 104; Tambling 1997, 127; Kallis 2014, 143; Kallis 2011, 77), had been the coveted location for several architectural projects throughout the 1930s (including the initial competition for construction of the Palazzo del Littorio in 1934), all of which were either unsuccessful or relocated to areas of Rome less densely packed with symbolic meaning (Tambling 1997, 127; Albarello 2016, 106; Kallis 2014, 143; Kallis 2011, 77).

As Kallis and Carlo Albarello both observe, inserting anything new into the already well-worn and multi-layered urban palimpsest of the historic centre was a daunting task that attracted and dissuaded architects in equal measure: while the extensive (and controversial) demolitions undertaken in the early 1930s to 'liberate' (select) ancient monuments by providing them 'breathing room' freed up prime real estate that fuelled the imagination of architects of all calibres, those brave enough to put forward submissions either had their proposals torn apart by critics or voluntarily withdrew them, stymied by the over-coded space that stifled their creativity while they struggled to design a new monument that would neither overcrowd the space, nor clash stylistically or chromatically with the ancient structures, nor reduce itself to gaudy imitation of those structures, nor confuse the architectural 'narrative' of empire that Via dell'Impero was meant to tell (Kallis 2014, 144; Albarello 2016, 106).

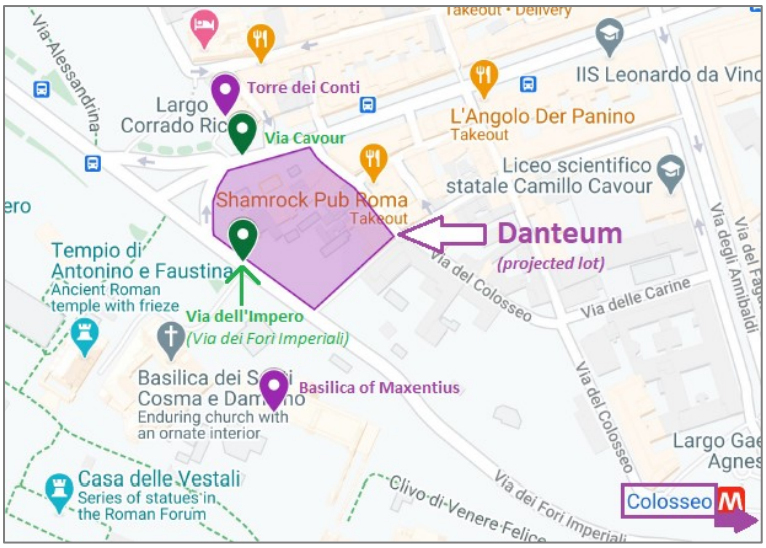

Figure 3.4: Danteum projected lot

The Danteum was conceived with all of these challenges in mind, with Valdameri, Lingeri, and Terragni conscious of the need for their new monument to respond to and

harmonize with the hyper-coded space. Presented as a 'temple' to Dante (Albarello 2016, 104; Albertini 1996, 136; Kallis 2011, 77, and 2014, 143), the building was meant to house a study centre devoted to the medieval poet replete with a library containing every edition of the *Commedia* (Albarello 2016, 104; Tambling 1997, 127; Emelianova 2015b, 33) but also, and with greater emphasis, to celebrate through its architecture "the genius of the Duce who was actualizing Dante's imperial dream" (R. A. Etlin in Tambling 1997, 127; see also Albarello 2016, 104-107).

From the outside, the Danteum would have been a big two-story rectangle.[52] The main structure would have been formed by two overlapping squares that would have been slightly off-set to create the narrow entrance corridor and, if I am not mistaken, a more direct entrance to the study centre and library on the opposite side of the building[53]; there would have been no grand frontal entrance (see fig. 3.5). On the side of the main entrance, there would also have been a long free-standing wall and a stele; were one to face this wall from the street, the stele would have been to the left of the wall, separated by a narrow gap, and its carving facing inward. To face the free-standing wall from the street, one would have had to stand along Via dell'Impero with one's back to the Basilica of Maxentius, and from this vantage point would have been able to see a marble frieze of the '100 scenes of the *Commedia*' carved by Mario Sironi (see fig. 3.6). The preferred approach to the building, however, would have been (if we are still facing the frieze) to the left of this. Moving to this position, one would have had the Torre dei Conti and Via Cavour

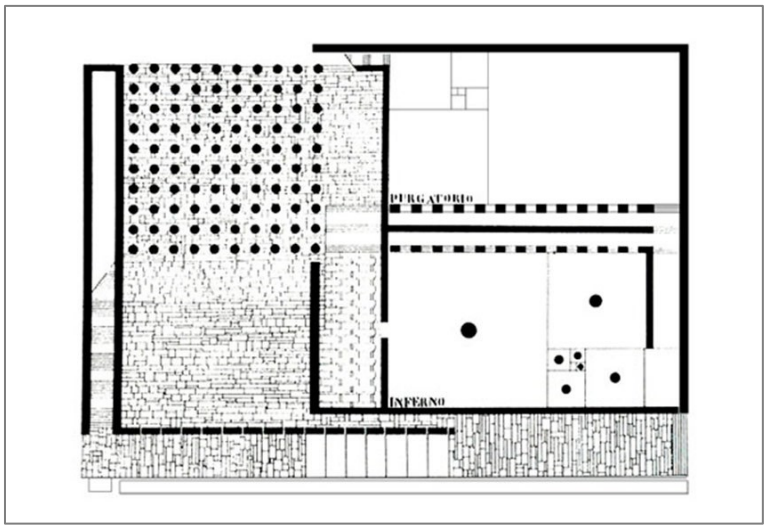

Figure 3.5: Danteum floor plan

[52] The following description of the Danteum's layout and intended visitor trajectory is based on the information provided in Albarello 2016, Kallis 2014 (and 2011), Emelianova 2015b, and the especially helpfully detailed Tambling 1997. In-text citations will only be provided for direct quotations.

[53] None of my sources are especially detailed about the location of the study centre or its point(s) of access. Based on the information provided by Tambling and Albarello about the location and size of the study centre, I believe it is probable that there would be a separate study centre entrance (or at least exit), but this is at best an educated guess.

behind oneself and seen, through the gap between the building and the free-standing wall that would have formed a corridor, the Colosseum (see fig. 3.7).[54]

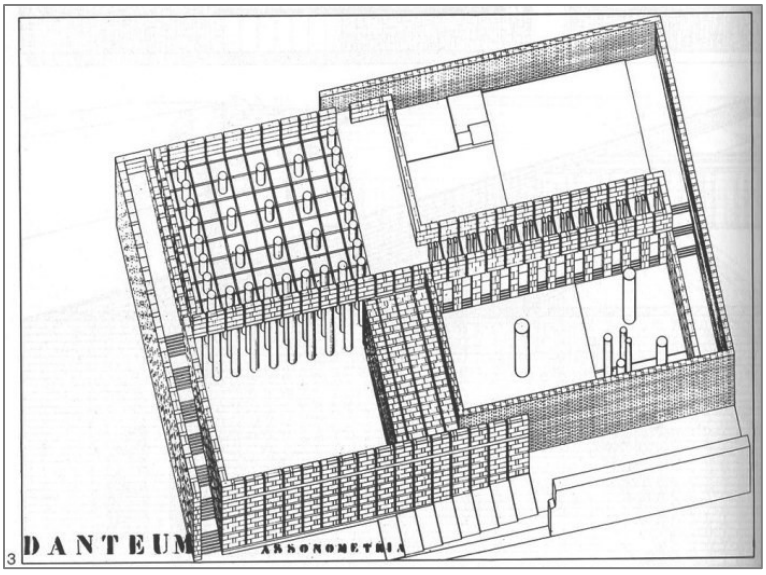

Figure 3.6: Danteum axonometric view

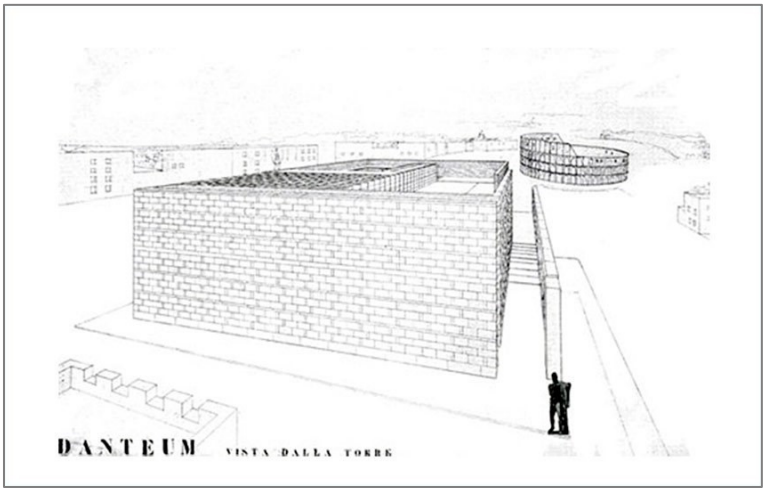

Figure 3.7: Danteum perspective view

This preferred approach pushes a clear narrative that is implied through the symbolism embedded in the building's design, from its location and the intended orientation of the visitors throughout their journey through the Danteum space to the building's designated construction materials and highly selective and limited incorporation of figural elements. A comprehensive analysis of the Danteum, however, is beyond the scope of this study, so in what follows I will draw attention to a few key elements that best serve my purpose. The main aspect I want to stress about the Danteum design generally is that it works to subliminally construct a narrative of Fascist imperialism that it wants to impart to the visitor by firmly guiding their movement through space and attempting to control what they see and how they see it. In this regard, the beginning and especially the end of the trajectory through the building are the most important segments to consider because, as the frame of the experience, they are in the best position to define what the visitor will take away from it.

[54] In the architectural plans, a set of stairs appears at the other end of this corridor, so one could in theory have approached with one's back to the Colosseum, but the intended itinerary would have been to approach from the Torre dei Conti.

The very beginning of the itinerary, then, is the walk up the open corridor created by the main building on the left and the free-standing wall on the right.[55] The preferred orientation for this walk already says much about what the building is meant to communicate. Here the visitor walks toward the Colosseum, iconic symbol of ancient Rome, in a gentle ascent up nine large steps; the visitor's movement at this point is parallel to the flow of traffic coursing along Via dell'Impero, a road recently opened by the Fascist government that forms a straight line from Piazza Venezia, site of Mussolini's offices, to the Colosseum. To the visitor's right as they walk up the pathway are one hundred marble blocks (alluding to the *Commedia*'s one hundred cantos) upon which are carved every verse in which Dante references and praises the Roman Empire in his *Commedia*. To read these verses, the visitor must stand oriented facing Via dell'Impero, and here is first outlined the nexus 'ancient Rome ← Dante → Fascist Rome' that will be deepened over the course of the visitor's trajectory through the Danteum.

That all of the verses carved into the wall's marble blocks are exclusively about the Roman Empire immediately communicates to the visitor that the 'temple' they are about to enter is devoted to 'Dante the political prophet,' and the street beyond the wall comes to signify a concretization of the desires expressed by (or attributed to) the amalgamation of engraved celebratory, yearning, and prophetic verses being 'actualized' by Fascism. The orientation and structure of this section of the visitor's trajectory further contributes to this narrative, with the indirect path leading to the entrance recalling, as Albarello observes, the "diritta via […] smarrita" of *Inferno* I (line 3) (Albarello 2016, 112), which is here being re-coded to refer to Fascism's interpretation of history. The visitor begins on a 'diritta via' up the corridor toward the Colosseum, but must then about-face toward the left to enter the Danteum proper, turning away from this 'straight path' (reminiscent of the proverbial 'straight and narrow' of moral rectitude) to walk into the building where, after crossing a small inner courtyard, they will find the 'dark wood' (a modest rectangular room of one hundred marble pillars supporting the enclosed upper floor of that part of the building) in which the poet-pilgrim found himself when he had lost his way. Morality, politics, and poetry are thus all compressed into one to body forth Fascism's typological interpretation of Italian history in one very dense architectonic metaphor: Italy had lost its right and moral imperial way, but now Fascism has set things straight again. The regime-endorsed Danteum, designed to feature a continuously rising trajectory and situated alongside the

[55] In the following discussion, I will use the present tense to simplify the text.

regime-excavated and paved Via dell'Impero across from the ancient Basilica of Maxentius — interpreted by the regime as a symbol for the unity of Church and Empire (Tambling 1997, 127), or morality and politics — would thus have stood as a testament to Fascism's success in guiding Italy back onto this 'diritta via.'

The end of the itinerary through the Danteum brings the visitor back full circle, not only to their physical starting point but also to the ideological emphases of the initial walk up to the entrance. The themes and cognitive associations evoked and elicited by the entrance re-emerge in full force as the visitor enters the Paradiso room, which would have been very bright: the room would have featured thirty-three glass columns, positioned above their marble pillar counterparts in the 'dark wood' below, that would have supported a glass ceiling (formed by a wooden grid framework and square panes of glass). Upon entering this room, however, the visitor would not have gone through these pillars just yet, but would have instead turned left and walked along the wall to reach the 'Empire room.' More of a corridor than a room, the Empire room would have the visitor walk alongside a central row of glass columns to reach the end of the room where there would be a representation of the 'M' turning into the imperial eagle from *Paradiso* XVIII (lines 94-107), after which they would retrace their steps to re-enter the Paradiso room proper. The solemn trek to and from this imperial eagle would have positioned the visitor once more parallel to the Via dell'Impero, so that in walking toward the eagle the visitor heads toward the Colosseum, and in returning to the Paradiso room they head toward Piazza Venezia.

The symbolism of this walk is tangible, and while it is unlikely that visitors would consciously notice this about their movement, subconscious associations would arguably still be made, reinforced by the dominance of glass as a building material in the Paradiso room which bears a strong resemblance (or at least thematic association) with the Casa del Fascio designed by Terragni in Como. The movement through these final two rooms literally walks the visitor through the motions of paying their respects to the empire of the past — the Empire room having been intentionally conceived as akin to the central nave of a cathedral, implying that the imperial eagle at the end of it is upon an altar — before moving toward the new Fascist empire, which is being symbolically conflated with paradise itself through the insistent use of glass and the Fascist associations with which it was invested by Terragni in particular (Tambling 1997, 130). There is much layering in this use of architectural rhetoric, which weaves together Latin Catholic codes, 'Fascist' materials, and the *Commedia*: Dante's heaven is made to look like an earthly cathedral

which is in turn made in the materials of the Casa del Fascio. The combined message thus seems to be something along the lines of 'Fascism will make a paradise of the Italian state.'

The visitor then exits and descends an exterior staircase, which they would have bypassed on their way to the Danteum entrance, to re-enter Fascist Rome under the watchful gaze of the Veltro carved upon the stele directly across from the staircase, thereby completing their physical and ideological journey through the Danteum. The staircase itself, according to Jeremy Tambling, was meant to symbolize the hill that the poet-pilgrim cannot climb at the beginning of the *Inferno* because it is blocked by three allegorical beasts (representing fraud, violence, and incontinence) that only the Veltro can chase away, which is why the visitor walks past it at the beginning of their own journey; having completed their journey through the Danteum, the visitor now descends these stairs, their passage on which is now 'sanctioned' as the three beasts have been chased off by the presence of the Veltro stele and the present-day man thought to incarnate it in Fascist interpretations of the *Commedia*.

The incorporation of Mussolini as the Veltro as the last thing visitors would have seen upon exiting the building sends a strong parting message that the Danteum is ultimately a celebration of Fascism's accomplishments — in a way, the 'temple to Dante' stands in for the poet himself who, thus bodied forth, guides the visitor along their journey and joins them in paying reverence to Mussolini. The journey through the Danteum thus takes on a greater metaphorical significance: visitors are first presented with Dante's 'imperial dream' and identified with him and his expressed/attributed desires, then follow in his footsteps through hell, purgatory, and paradise, stopping by a hyper-coded shrine to Italian empire along the way, to exit the building facing an affirmation that Mussolini has made this dream —which is now 'their dream' also — a tangible reality; the now visible Veltro allows them to walk upon the hill at last, something Dante could not do in his own lifetime while the imperial dream remained a dream.

The fact that the visitor is only enabled to walk *down* this 'hill,' however, communicates a mixed message that appears to subvert the narrative carefully crafted by the itinerary up to this point. The Veltro that should be enabling people to *ascend* the hill toward salvation in heaven (and therefore bypass the tortuous journey through the three realms of the afterlife) is instead standing watch as they *descend* toward him, introducing a crux in the Danteum's symbolism: if heaven is akin to the Casa del Fascio, does that make Fascist Rome a living hell? The building, which up to this point has been architectonically recreating, with some liberties, the poet-

pilgrim's salvific journey through the realms of the afterlife, brings the visitor back to the moment prior to that journey beginning, when the poet-pilgrim is lost, thus in a sense negating the transcendental dimension of that journey, both for the poet-pilgrim and for the visitor 'joining' him during their walk through the Danteum, by placing them back exactly where they started. The entire spiritual journey is undercut, and heaven and hell become conflated so that it is unclear in which realm the visitor should want to find themselves — or with which realm Fascism wants to associate itself.

The ambiguity of this close, however, feels oddly appropriate for a regime and ideology so full of contradictions. It certainly tracks with Italian Fascism's desire to be everything for everyone and to contain everything within itself (following Mussolini's "tutto nello Stato, nulla fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato"), and so the descent (rather than ascent) into the Fascist Veltro's Rome, despite being — or perhaps because it is — contradictory, provides a unique insight into the muddled ethical universe of Fascism that seems to be reflected in Nattini's benign representation of Lucifer in the *Imagini dantesche* as well, to which I will now turn in the next chapter. Much like the visitors to the Danteum being scripted to move *away* from heaven by the projected building's trajectory, Nattini's Lucifer embodies a set of contradictions within Nattini's visual adaptation of the *Commedia* through which the artist communicates something beyond Dante's verse, a beyond that is closely aligned with the artist's socio-historical environment and reveals an (in this case) unexplored ideological complicity between artifact and context.

Chapter 4: Representing Lucifer

Nattini's Lucifer is arguably the most interesting figure in all of the *Imagini dantesche*. Imposing yet soft, he stands as a testament to his creator's deeply personal engagement with the *Commedia*. As seems to befit its place in the chronology of the *Imagini* production, exhibition, and reception history, the Lucifer painting, which measures 160 x 112 cm, is the largest of all Nattini's *Commedia* cycle. Likely completed by the end of 1930, it would have been first unveiled to the public in March 1931 in the Sala delle Statue of the Sforza Castle, where the first full exhibition of Nattini's *Inferno* watercolours was held (Gizzi 1998a; Cassinari 2012; Depalmi 2007) — an exhibition that could well be considered the dress rehearsal for the Parisian exhibition that ran from April 21 to May 10, 1931, and marked the peak of public interest in Nattini's illustrated *Commedia*. In terms of the broader socio-historical context, Nattini's Lucifer also comes into being in time for the upcoming Fascist *decennale*, in the midst of the regime's *svolta totalitaria* and the early burgeoning of its imperialistic pursuits. In terms of the specific context of the *Imagini*, he comes to upset the pattern of image-text 'fidelity' established up to that point, and in so doing signals his significance to the viewer. In this final chapter, I thus seek to offer an interpretation of what Nattini's Lucifer means and to what contexts it responds.

I will first contrast Nattini's painted figure with the verse description of Lucifer in *Inferno* XXXIV that it accompanies to establish in what aspects Nattini takes liberties with Dante's poem and compare it to other artists' renditions of the same figure to argue that the specific liberties Nattini chooses to take seem idiosyncratic based on these comparisons and on his own general representational style in the *Imagini* as a whole. I will next consider what the figure of Lucifer more generally represented by the 1920s, taking note of key historical shifts in what Lucifer signified from the late medieval period to the early twentieth century and with particular attention to how the figure was interpreted in Italy when Nattini was painting his Lucifer. Lastly, I will place Nattini's Lucifer in dialogue with this interpretive tradition and with the painting's socio-historical context of production (i.e., Fascist Italy by 1930) to argue that it embodies a Fascist ethos and sheds light on the contradictory nature of Fascist ethics and identity. Ultimately, I seek to open up a more nuanced conversation about Nattini's *Imagini* that acknowledges their ties to Fascism and, in so doing, can begin to explore whether it is complicit with or critical of Fascist ideology and what that means for the twenty-first century viewer.

4.1. Analyzing Nattini's Lucifer

Like many before him, and following Dante's lead, Nattini allows the figure of Lucifer to dominate his illustration to *Inferno* XXXIV, his massive form occupying the upper third of the image while Dante and Virgil are only just visible through a gap in the ice around his midriff. Nattini's Lucifer, however, is not Dante's: indeed, Nattini takes idiosyncratic liberties with Dante's Lucifer that run counter to the affect of the poem and further mark the single greatest exception to the otherwise firmly established and generally respected representational strategy of fidelity that he employs in his other *Imagini dantesche*.

This becomes immediately evident when we compare Nattini's painted figure to Dante's detailed verse portrait in *Inferno* XXXIV (lines 4-75). Dante's Lucifer is a monstrous, caricatural colossus, so large in fact that Dante describes himself as closer in stature to a giant than a giant is to one of Lucifer's arms ("più con un gigante io mi convegno, / che i giganti non fan con le sue braccia," lines 30-31). This 'King of Hell' is moreover beastly, woefully hideous ("S'el fu sì bel com' elli è ora brutto, / . . . / ben dee da lui procedere ogne lutto," lines 34-36), and covered in matted, ice-crusted fleecy hair which Virgil will use as handholds to clamber down Lucifer's body with Dante on his back ("di vello in vello giù discese poscia / tra 'l folto pelo e le gelate croste," lines 74-75). His head has three faces: a central red one, in line with his chest, and one above each shoulder, the one to the viewer's left black and the one to the viewer's right yellowish white (lines 37-45). Beneath each of these faces is a pair of titanic, bat-like wings, each larger than a ship's sail, which produce three separate winds and keep Cocytus frozen with their restless flapping (lines 46-52).

As Dante, terrified, draws nearer to the towering shaggy figure, which from afar had appeared to him as a windmill on a foggy night (lines 4-7), he sees that Lucifer is crying. Tears trickle from all six of the Devil's eyes and dribble down his three chins where they mix with the blood and saliva gushing from his mouths as he champs on the three men whom Dante believed were the greatest traitors of all time: Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus, who betrayed Julius Caesar, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus (lines 53-67). Brutus, "che pende dal nero ceffo […] / […] si storce, e non fa motto," and Cassius, "che par sì membruto" hanging out of the yellowish white face's mouth, are being chewed up feet first (lines 64-67); Judas, however, "c'ha maggior pena," finds himself head-first in Lucifer's central red mouth while the Devil scratches at his back so savagely "che tal volta la schiena / rimanea de la pelle tutta brulla"

(lines 58-63). Judas' additional punishment implies that Lucifer has claws with which to maul this traitor of all traitors, who seems to be second in reprehensibility only to Lucifer himself, which comes to complete Dante's overall representation of the 'king of hell' as a monstrous Other that allegorically symbolizes the brutish depravity of evil and, ultimately, its impotence: this 'king' is as solidly trapped in ice as any of the other sinners punished in the ninth circle who lie around him, submerged and visible "come festuca in vetro" (line 12), and it is moreover his own flapping wings that keep him there.

Dante's message with this caricatural monster seems to be that evil is self-defeating, a perversion of the divine order of things just as Lucifer's three faces in the poem represent a perversion of the Holy Trinity that the Dante-pilgrim will glimpse at the end of the *Paradiso*. The aesthetic and compositional choices Dante makes in his verse portrait are indeed anchored in his religious beliefs, as exemplified by the differentiation of Judas's punishment from that of Brutus and Cassius: Judas 'ha maggior pena' because, having betrayed one of the three persons of God, he has committed a much graver act of treason than either Brutus or Cassius, who betrayed a mere man who is himself denied salvation (although Dante places Caesar in Limbo, damned only for not being Christian).

The colours assigned to each of Lucifer's faces also tie into the religious guiding thread of Dante's interpretation of treachery: John Freccero, in his 1965 article "The Sign of Satan," notes that the choice of yellowish white, black, and red for the Devil's faces alludes to the exegetical tradition surrounding the mulberry tree in Luke 17:6, the three colours of its fruit interpreted as a metaphor for both conversion and decay. Lucifer embodies the process of decay, associated with the fall from grace (the waxen as opposed to pristine white of the right-most face serving to indicate the beginning of a movement toward the 'blackness' of sin), while the pilgrim is meant to undergo the opposite change in a process of conversion that begins with him leaving behind the cold blackness of hell to journey toward the warm light of paradise.

This is not the message conveyed by Nattini's Lucifer, who seems to serve a different symbolic function. Nattini's Lucifer in fact conserves just enough of the physical characteristics of Dante's Lucifer to recall the poet's verse portrait, but not enough to be convincingly Dantean as Nattini invests his Lucifer with a completely different affect: the painted figure does not inspire the horror or even the disgust elicited by Dante's descriptions, but rather strikes the viewer with his sympathetic humanity (see fig. 4.1). Although appropriately colossal, his

Figure 4.1: Nattini *Inferno* XXXIV (P)

immense size highlighted by the comparatively tiny figures of Dante (in red) and Virgil (barely visible in his white shroud) making their way closer to his right flank through a gap in the ice that rises in frozen waves up to his navel, this 'king of hell' is almost beautiful. Occupying the middleground of the composition, his well-proportioned body is turned slightly toward the viewer's right,[56] his six large, bat-like wings, of which only four are visible (three on the right, painted in receding planes, and the front-most left one, the tip curving toward the body), extended behind him, presumably attached to his back. Virtually hairless, excepting his well-defined eyebrows and a tuft of short blond hair atop his head, he stands with his arms wide open, leaving his smooth and softly contoured chest and sides fully exposed while tendrils of pale mist branch out from behind his head, seemingly conferring upon it a soft glow that illuminates his shoulders and collarbone like a faded echo of the halo Lucifer might have had as an angel prior to his fall from grace.

As if to strengthen this association with a prelapsarian state, the overall atmosphere of the image is bright and crystalline, in complete contrast to the abject darkness Dante claims

[56] All directions mentioned in the description of Lucifer will be from the viewer's perspective (e.g., left = canvas left).

characterizes his pit of hell, and Lucifer's two visible faces (the third is implied by the pose and the illustration context) are turned upward, the eyes looking up and off into the distance as if in contemplation. These faces form the focal point of the illustration, with the rising motion of the ice in the composition, which appears to have flash-frozen around Lucifer's midriff as he was emerging from Cocytus, guiding the viewer's gaze to look up at them in the upper left of the image. The left-most face, black, has dark, neutrally positioned brows, light gray eyes looking somewhere beyond the left hand, a straight nose, and full lips, between which we see a sinner—Brutus—hanging limply, bent double over the lower lip with his legs inside Lucifer's mouth and his arms dangling down past the Devil's chin. To its right and seen mostly in profile, the middle face, which Nattini paints white rather than red, sports one blond brow arcing down toward a slightly convex nose, one pale gray eye visible, and thin lips in which a sinner, presumably Judas, is trapped with legs dangling out of the Devil's middle mouth, spread knees bent and feet flexed while head, arms, and torso have disappeared inside. Neither face seems especially concerned with the figure lodged between its lips. The black face's expression seems resigned and vaguely wistful, perhaps even weary; the white face's expression is blank and distant. There is moreover a conspicuous absence of tears and bloody drool, and the arms held far away from Lucifer's torso with their trim-nailed hands make it seem unlikely that the figure being ruminated by the middle mouth is regularly mauled as part of its eternal punishment.

The combination of detached expressions and open posture create an impression of harmlessness, which is compounded by the indecision communicated by the way Nattini's Lucifer holds his arms. The left arm, for instance, is raised nearly shoulder-height, the elbow bent at a hard right angle with the forearm rising, but the potentially strong motion is broken by the hand that falls limply at the wrist, fingers curling loosely toward the palm. The right arm is held lower, contributing to a diagonal line that runs across the chest from left shoulder to right elbow, and bent at a softer angle, the hand again hanging slackly from the wrist. This posture leaves Lucifer vulnerable, rendering his tremendous size impressive but not threatening: he may be large, trapped in the pit of hell, and charged with effecting the special punishment reserved for Brutus, Judas, and Cassius, but his mind is detached from his circumstances as he ponders something beyond his current state. The overall effect of Nattini's representational choices in the *Inferno* XXXIV illustration thus presents the viewer with a sympathetic and vulnerable Lucifer

who is physically but not mentally hell-bound, a re-interpretation of the figure that warps Dante's verse portrait beyond recognition.

While Nattini is neither the first nor last *Commedia* illustrator to take liberties with the Lucifer's physical appearance, what sets his *Inferno* XXXIV illustration apart is his unprecedented radical change of the mood of the canto. This becomes all the more evident when juxtaposing Nattini's Lucifer to other artists' renditions of the King of Hell, as even in the work of artists who take critically acknowledged liberties with Dante's poem in their *Commedia* illustration cycles do we find examples of Lucifers more convincingly Dantean that Nattini's, even though Nattini's *Imagini* are the ones typically lauded for their alleged perfect fidelity to the text.

As discussed in more detail in chapter 2 of this thesis, Jean-Pierre Barricelli, for instance, in a 1992 monograph boldly concludes his chapter "The Poetic Realism of Nattini" by claiming that Nattini rendered his *Commedia* illustrations

> not with the private stylizations of previous serial commentators like Botticelli, Blake, and Doré, or with the modernistic emphases of later ones like Rauschenberg and Dalí, or with the vibrant pictorial figurations of Phillips, but with the affectionate attention of an accurate and philosophical reader, steeped in the Renaissance aesthetics that Dante adumbrated (Barricelli 1992, 63).

Leaving aside the problematic notion that an artist could illustrate a poem without including any 'private stylizations' — or, as Barricelli puts it in his later article, "Dante in the Arts: A Survey" (1996), without 'personalizing' it (87) — Barricelli's argument falls flat in the case of Nattini's Lucifer, especially when compared to the Lucifer as portrayed by most of the artists with whom he contrasts Nattini in the quotation above.

Going through these artists' Lucifers in chronological order, Sandro Botticelli's two illustrations for *Inferno* XXXIV seriously call into question what Barricelli intends by "private stylizations" when claiming that Botticelli inserts some into his *Commedia* cycle and Nattini does not (see figs. 4.2 and 4.3 on the next page). Botticelli produced one full-body and one torso view sketch of Dante's Lucifer, retaining all the physical traits Dante had ascribed to him; while neither sketch recreates the full scene, the affect of Dante's infernal king is preserved in the grotesque expressions of the three faces that glare angrily ahead in their respective directions.

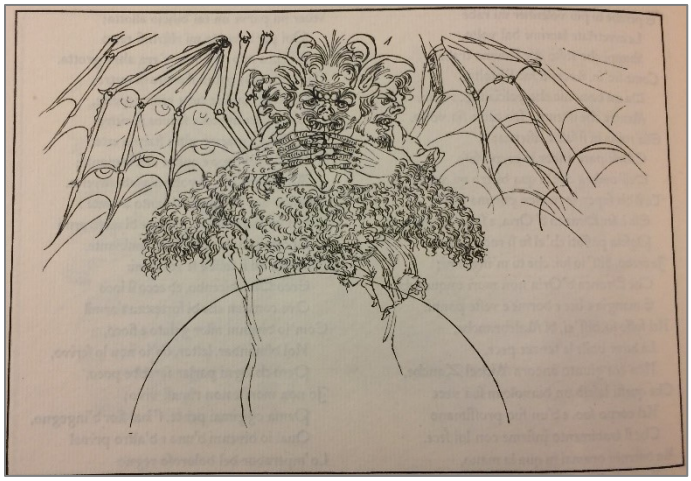

Figure 4.2: Botticelli *Inferno* XXXIV (torso)

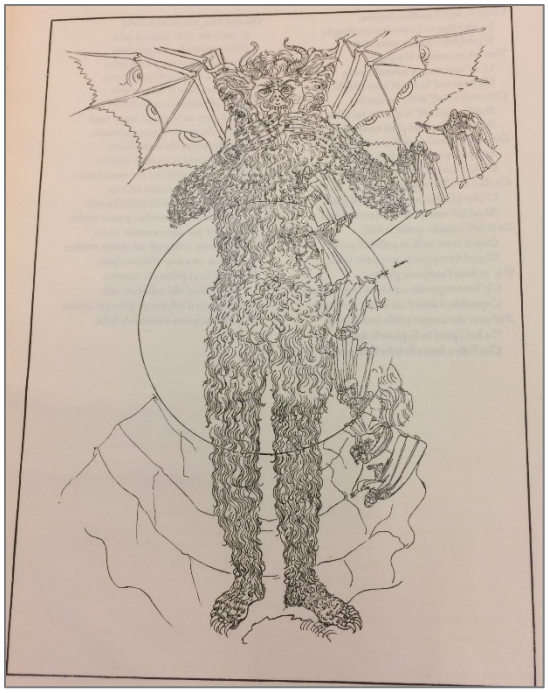

Figure 4.3: Botticelli *Inferno* XXXIV (full body)

William Blake's version is significantly more humanoid (see fig. 4.4), dispensing with most of the physical details Dante specifies in his verse barring the immense size, bat-like wings, and three faces, but the background of the image is darkened, the negative space surrounding the drawing of Lucifer filled in with black chalk and a coat of a dark watercolour paint, thus preserving the atmosphere of Dante's infernal pit; Blake's Lucifer, moreover, appears to be crying, so while Blake's composition in this illustration recalls — and perhaps inspired — Nattini's, it maintains a stronger connection to the *Commedia* through its overall mood.

Figure 4.4: Blake *Inferno* XXXIV

Gustave Doré, for his part, retains most of the physical details Dante specified, with some minor changes (for example, the physiognomy of his Lucifer is more humanoid than Botticelli's) but without straying far from the verse (see fig. 4.5); moreover, like Botticelli but with greater emphasis, Doré recreates the mood of the canto as established by the poem in his composition, placing Lucifer against a dark backdrop and positioning him

Figure 4.5: Doré *Inferno* XXXIV

hunched over, closed in on himself as his hands hold Judas up to his middle mouth, elbows resting on the smooth, flat surface of the frozen lake from which there appears to be no escape, no give in the ice that keeps his lower body fixed in place.

Robert Rauschenberg, Salvador Dalí, and Tom Phillips, each of whom produced *Commedia* cycles after Nattini finished working on his, depict Lucifers even less grounded in the concrete details of Dante's verse portrait than Blake's, but once again each in his own way preserves the reigning atmosphere of Dante's infernal pit. Dalí, like Blake and Nattini, presents the viewer with a humanoid Lucifer. For the most part, he uses the poem as premise and inspiration for his surrealist fantasy: rather than a three-faced figure trapped in ice, for instance, Dalí's Lucifer has but one face and is caught up to his chest in what appears to be sand or very dry ground, a bone sticking out of his head and few teeth in his gums, the flesh of his face and of the left side of his body creased in grotesque detail.[57] This figure, however, like Doré's is closed in upon itself, its sunken eyes shut, and its neck bowed in defeat, recalling the affect of Dante's self-defeated king of hell even though the composition of the illustration in general has little to do with what is described in the poem.

Rauschenberg and Phillips in turn present the viewer with stylized abstractions meant to comment on the poem for a postwar twentieth-century audience through the dialogic exchange between verse and image. Rauschenberg emphasizes the bestiality of Dante's Lucifer, taking artistic license in his text-to-image translation by making each of Lucifer's faces a different

[57] There is much confusion surrounding which of Dalí's *Inferno* illustrations is meant to represent Lucifer. The illustration I have chosen to describe here, for instance, is most often attributed to *Inferno* XXVII and called "The Devil Logician" in online searches. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè, however, in their 2007 book *Dante on View* identify this illustration, which they reproduce, as "Lucifero" (Braida and Calè 2007, 137 [fig. 9.4]). I have found no other illustration by Dalí so titled online, leading me to believe that the painting tends to be misattributed to *Inferno* XXVII, an interpretation supported by the image itself which demonstrates evidence of a connection to *Inferno* XXXIV through elements of its composition, such as the human figure head-first in the focal figure's mouth, and the focal figure appearing to be trapped up to its chest in the ground upon which two tiny figures, presumably Dante and Virgil, are standing.

Figure 4.6: Rauschenberg *Inferno* XXXIV

primate's (see fig. 4.6); Phillips instead stresses the abject darkness of Dante's pit of hell, presenting the viewer with a large, dark, three-headed figure, just barely differentiated from the black background of the image.[58] Each further retains the original colouring of Dante's Lucifer's faces, which serves to anchor their commentary in the symbolism of the poem and the themes expressed by it, while the grittiness of each illustration — the scratchy quality of Rauschenberg's strokes and the dominance of black in Phillips' render — maintains the dark, ominous atmosphere Dante establishes in *Inferno* XXXIV.

Aside from perhaps Botticelli and Doré, none of these other illustrators is especially faithful to the realism of Dante's hell, but they do rely on the overall atmosphere of Dante's hell, and the affect of his Lucifer, to inform the mood of their illustrations. Nattini is the only illustrator of the ones discussed in this chapter who invests his illustration with a completely different atmosphere and thereby dissociates his representation of Lucifer from the illustration context as the link between text and image becomes tenuous at best.

This would not be so remarkable were Nattini not in general utterly faithful to the text of the *Commedia* in his visual translation of it. His transgressions of this representational strategy, when they do occur, are thus magnified, taking on additional importance especially since they contradict the general reception and reading of his *Imagini dantesche*. As discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, while Nattini may have been playful with his choices in terms of composition and focus, almost all of the elements of his *Imagini*, particularly in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, can be tied to concrete details in the canto being illustrated in a near one-to-one text/image translation. Even within the rest of his illustration to *Inferno* XXXIV, Nattini abides by this *modus operandi*: it emerges not only in his accurate representation of the scale of the Lucifer

[58] Phillips has produced four separate illustrations to *Inferno* XXXIV. The one to which I refer here can be seen on the Tate Gallery website at the following URL: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/phillips-canto-xxxiv-no-title-p07895

figure in comparison to the tiny figures of Dante and Virgil, who are barely visible through a gap in the ice in the centre of the composition (see fig. 4.7), but also in the wildly contorted poses of the sinners of Judecca trapped for eternity beneath the icy surface of Cocytus "come festuca in vetro" (*Inf*. XXXIV, lines 10-15; see fig. 4.8). Moreover, in his other *Inferno* illustrations Nattini has proven himself a master of signalling the darkness of hell without compromising on clarity of detail in his composition (see, for instance, his illustration to *Inferno* V especially [see fig. 2.4 on page 27]). Even his limbo has a dark sky, so that, despite the luminescence of the verdant field, the souls here are still clearly in hell (see fig. 4.9 on the next page). But Nattini's pit of hell is oddly bright, his Lucifer appearing as a light-bearer with his ghostly halo rather than an infernal king of darkness, suggesting that the figure ought to be interpreted on its own terms, beyond its immediate material context as a Dante illustration.

Figure 4.7: Nattini *Inferno* XXXIV (P); detail

Figure 4.8: Nattini *Inferno* XXXIV (P); detail

4.2. Lucifer by the 1920s

One way to approach Nattini's Lucifer on its own terms is to examine it from the perspective of the shifting signification of Lucifer in the arts over time. While a full overview of

Figure 4.9: Nattini *Inferno* IV (M)

Lucifer's evolution from neutral mentions of a *satan* in the Hebrew Bible[59] to favourable contemporary representations of the Devil in mainstream media (the popular Netflix series *Lucifer* comes to mind) is beyond the scope of this chapter, two particularly large shifts occur between Dante's verse portrait and Nattini's large-scale watercolour that seem to strongly influence the latter, namely the aestheticization of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667; revised 1674) and the multiple character tropes it inspired in the long nineteenth century. Indeed, Nattini appears to draw primarily on nineteenth-century tropes to design his Lucifer, although his subtle play with the physical traits ascribed to the figure in *Inferno* XXXIV, in particular the colour-coded faces, suggests that the poem remains an important interpretive key to understanding what Nattini sought to communicate through his more modern Lucifer.[60]

By the 1920s, European artistic and literary depictions of the Devil had for the most part dispensed with the beastliness ascribed to the figure in medieval representations such as Dante's. Satan's transformation in the European imaginary from the Middle Ages to the turn of the twentieth century is easiest to trace in literature, as Mario Praz does in his seminal 1930 book-length study *The Romantic Agony* (first published in English in 1933; I am using the revised second English edition from 1970), where gradations become more apparent. In most medieval depictions, Lucifer is a caricatural monster, always at least in part bestial, a representational strategy meant to signify the extent of his fall from highest-ranking angel in heaven to the abject

[59] Esther J. Hamori, in her contribution to *Evil: A History* edited by Andrew Chignell, notes that originally the word *satan* in the Hebrew Bible simply meant 'adversary,' and was neither used as a proper noun nor associated, in any of its appearances in the text, with the Hebrew words for 'evil' or 'wickedness' (Hamori 2019, 82-85). Instead, the *satan* in the Hebrew Bible is characterized primarily by his intelligence and eloquence, but not by either temptation, deception, or destruction — those traits are associated with other figures, including God himself, and as Hamori remarks, intelligence and eloquence "are not bad traits. If one can avoid transposing a later Christian image onto the character in the Hebrew Bible, one might even call him . . . admirable" (87; ellipsis original).

[60] In this section, I will be using 'Lucifer,' 'Satan,' and 'the Devil' interchangeably when referring to the figure in general.

misery of his station in hell (often mapped onto the Great Chain of Being). This approach persists, as Praz observes, well into the early modern period, in figures such as Torquato Tasso's Mongibello in *La Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) who retains many of the traits, such as the mouth full of blood and the awful stench, that respectively characterize Dante's Lucifer and the pit of hell in which the pilgrim meets him (Praz 1970, 55). Giambattista Marino, however, in the posthumously published *La strage degli Innocenti* (1632) provides Satan with a subjective interiority that begins to paint the figure in a new light: while still monstrous and beastly in appearance, Marino's Satan exhibits a hitherto unprecedented self-aware sadness at what he has lost through his fall, as well as a Promethean understanding of the 'nobility' of his ambition (Praz 1970, 56).

The budding interiority of Marino's Satan is brought to full bloom by John Milton, whose Satan in *Paradise Lost* demonstrates such a compelling and relatable inner life that it led the Romantics to claim, as did Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* (1821; published posthumously in 1840), that Satan was in fact the hero of *Paradise Lost* (Praz 1970, 56-59). The sentiment is epitomized in William Blake's oft-quoted comment that Milton "was of the Devil's party without knowing it" (qtd. in Praz 1970, 58), an interpretation that likely had Milton fuming in his grave. Blake's and Shelley's readings of Milton's Satan nonetheless cut to the core of what makes the figure so remarkable: in *Paradise Lost*, Milton presents evil as compelling and attractive. Indeed, Milton's Satan is charismatic and beautiful, his angelic form having "yet not lost / All her Original brightness, nor appear'd / Less then Arch Angel ruind" (*PL* 1.591-593).[61] With his eloquent interior monologues, understandable motivations, and the fact that he has to *become* evil over the course of the epic, his fall from grace essentially protracted over the entire poem, Milton's Satan easily slides into the role of tragic hero. And that is precisely Milton's point: Satan in *Paradise Lost* may appear heroic, but his choices and actions are no less reprehensible regardless of his qualities and charisma. Milton invites his readers to see through Satan's rhetoric and progressively more tarnished angelic appearance to realize that by insisting on 'making evil his good' (*PL* 4.110) and over-committing to his pride Satan continuously adds insult to his own injury, thereby condemning himself to perpetual misery and, in his most honest moments of solitary reflection, aware that this is what he is doing.

[61] All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are based on the edition available online through *The John Milton Reading Room* courtesy of Dartmouth College (https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/contents/text.shtml).

Milton's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers, however, seem to have latched solely onto his Satan's heroic veneer, giving rise to the late eighteenth-century "generous outlaw" or "sublime criminal" figures, such as Karl Moor in Friedrich von Schiller's 1781 *Räuber*, and the "Fatal Men" of Gothic fiction, such as Father Schedoni in Ann Radcliffe's 1797 *The Italian* (Praz 1970, 59-62). Indeed, even though, as Anne Paolucci (1964) convincingly argues, Milton's Satan is in essence ultimately no different from Dante's, given that his hyper-mobility is of no aid in escaping the hell he has internalized ("Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell," *PL* 4.75) and audaciously believes he can rule ("Divided Empire with Heav'ns King I hold," *PL* 4.111), the Romantics and later the Decadents seem to have had eyes and ears only for Milton's Devil's outward semblance and smooth eloquence; their consequent reading of the figure gave rise to several literary tropes which, while not used to represent Lucifer specifically, were meant to recall Satanic elements and thereby confer a dark glamour to the characters they categorize. Schiller, for instance, "speaks of the 'majesty' of his Robber, of 'the honourable malefactor, the majestic monster'" who from "crime to crime […] rushes into the abyss of despair" (Praz 1970, 59-60); Radcliffe gives Schedoni a 'striking' appearance, communicating through features such as his stalking gait, the "livid paleness of his face," the "traces of burnt-out passions" marking his physiognomy, and his piercing eyes an intensity akin to what Milton's Satan exhibits in his soliloquy on Mount Niphates in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* (Praz 1970, 61).

The characteristics of both these tropes come to be further refined in the "rebel type," another common Miltonic-Satan-inspired trope of the turn of the nineteenth century that Praz argues was "brought to perfection" by George Gordon, Lord Byron (Praz 1970, 63). Based on many of the poet's characters and on the poet himself, the Byronic hero, as the archetype is often called, has much in common with the Gothic "Fatal Man," and like this trope and the "sublime criminal" it re-situates — and thereby familiarizes and domesticates — the source of moral evil within the bosom of 'regular' men rather than in an Othered Lucifer. That is, while these tropes apply to characters that are not 'every person' figures per se (they are usually disturbed males of aristocratic lineage, a rather specific sub-set of society), they are not polarized into a single figure such as *the* Devil either, or even especially demonized (i.e., they are almost always unquestionably humans, albeit of an emphatically morally twisted variety).

Moving into the nineteenth century proper, the characteristics of Milton's Satan begin to bleed together with those of the various character archetypes it inspired in the work of the

Decadents, such as Charles Baudelaire's *Les Litanies de Satan* (published as part of his 1857 *Les Fleurs du mal*). Matthew J. Smith argues that in writing about the Devil, Baudelaire "doesn't want his readers to simply think of Satan; he wants them to think of Milton's Satan — to remember not only the beauty of misery [as did the Romantics] but also the self-cause of Satan's misery in *Paradise Lost* and the reader's complicity in it" (Smith 2017, 218). For instance, while the speaker in *Les Fleurs du mal* sometimes admires Satan, most references to the Devil in the book "also portray [him] . . . as a symbol of defeat" (Smith 2017, 219). Finding in Milton's Satan "a figure of failed energy and melancholy virility" (Smith 2017, 212), Baudelaire presents his Satan in *Les Litanies* as simultaneously capable and incapacitated: the Devil is an accomplished Prince of Exile, knowledgeable and creative, but he is also vanquished and silenced, and while the words of the poem seem to praise Satan and bemoan a God who betrayed him, the praises of the roles and achievements for which he is credited in the couplets separated by the refrain, "Ô Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère!",[62] seem increasingly ironic,[63] making it unclear whether the reader should interpret this Satan as friend or foe.

Nattini's Lucifer appears to be a natural continuation of this trend in representations of the Devil. In fact, Nattini's watercolour giant is arguably Baudelairean, more likely to be the addressee of Baudelaire's closing prayer to *Les Litanies*, in which the Devil is interpellated by the lines, "Gloire et louange à toi, Satan, dans les hauteurs / Du Ciel, où tu régnas, et dans les profondeurs / De l'Enfer, où, vaincu, tu rêves en silence!", than the wild beast champing at fleshy bits in Dante's *Inferno*. The contemplative expressions of each visible face coupled with the clear rising motion of the ice around the figure who seems to emerge from it further recalls Baudelaire's "Prince de l'exil, à qui l'on a fait tort / Et qui, vaincu, toujours [se redresse] plus fort" (*Les Litanies*, second couplet).

There appears to be a certain mirroring between this 'prince of exile' and Baudelaire himself, who struggled throughout his career to support himself financially as a writer and whose first and best-known collection of poetry brought him fame and infamy in equal measure. Nattini also seems to identify with this figure, insofar as he appears to have modelled his Lucifer on himself. A photograph of Nattini shirtless in front of a statue by Arrigo Minerbi, reproduced in

[62] All quotations from *Les Litanies de Satan* are taken from the edition available online courtesy of FleursDuMal.org (fleursdumal.org/poem/191).
[63] For example, the invention of gun powder in the eleventh couplet seems paltry consolation for human suffering given that its use causes much suffering.

the guide for the fall 2015 Museo Comunale d'Arte Moderna Ascona exhibition *Amos Nattini e la Divina Commedia figurata tra le due guerre: Arte, architettura e lettere in dialogo* (Mazzarelli 2015c, 12), in fact bears a striking resemblance to his Lucifer: juxtaposing the two images, it would seem that the Lucifer is Nattini with a few added features supplied by the photograph (in which the head of a white marble statue to the right provides a plausible analogue to the Lucifer's white face) and the artist's imagination (e.g., for the bat wings and halo).

Nattini's decision to cast himself as his Lucifer is suggestive of his understanding of his role as an artist under Fascism: the pensive expression he has given himself, along with the emphasis on duality he has introduced in his take on the figure by showing only two of the Lucifer's three faces (as well as making those faces black and white), speaks to a sentiment of ambivalence and dividedness, of creativity meeting constraint and being unsure of how it should feel about a force that at once limits and enables its exercise. Beyond this personal, subjective mirroring, however, it may be helpful to reflect more broadly on the cultural interpretations of the Devil under Fascism, of which the 1936 *Enciclopedia Italiana* entry, "SATANA," provides a microcosm.[64]

The "SATANA" entry is sub-divided into three sections, each written by a different author. The first section, by Giuseppe Ricciotti, provides a historical-theological overview of Satan's origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition with a heavy Christian bias in its reading of the Hebrew Bible that imposes the qualities attributed to the Christian Devil (such as deceptiveness) onto the Hebrew *satan* (see Hamori 2019 for a compelling discussion of the Hebrew *satan*).

The second section, by Paolo Arcari, focuses on Satan in literature. Occupying the bulk of the entry, the section opens with a discussion of Dante's Lucifer which Arcari later implies belongs to a tradition representing the 'authentic' Satan, placing the *Commedia* on equal footing with Scripture and Patristic writings. Later medieval and Renaissance writers, claims Arcari, contributed to the decadence of this 'authentic' Satan by attributing to the Devil the comical characteristics of Dante's lesser devils (the *malebranche* from *Inferno* XXI to XXIII), turning the fearsome adversary into a buffoon. Like Praz, whose work he consulted for his part of the entry, Arcari credits Milton with the first serious aesthetic change Satan undergoes in the European

[64] The *Enciclopedia* also contains entries entitled "DIAVOLO" and "LUCIFERO," but these are significantly shorter than the entry for "SATANA," providing little beyond a brief etymology of their respective entry-header terms. I have thus opted to focus exclusively on the "SATANA" entry, which provides a fuller discussion.

imagination and argues that the reversal Milton introduced in the Devil's appearance (from hideous beast to still beautiful fallen angel) set the stage for a corresponding polemical reversal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that invested the Devil with a new symbolism. No longer the tempter, father of sin and lies, Lucifer came to be exalted as the "vinto di ieri" who will be the "vittorioso di oggi e di domani" in works such as Giosuè Carducci's *Inno a Satana* (1863) and Mario Rapisardi's *Lucifero* (1887).

In this guise, as Arcari observes in a list of examples from multiple Western European traditions, Satan enjoys a ubiquitous presence in literary and dramatic works, and Arcari concludes his overview of Satan in literature noting that it would seem "che S. *debba* riapparire nel dopoguerra novecentesco . . . Ma anche se la sua storia letteraria fosse conclusa, S. resta uno dei vocaboli più insistenti e più complessi dell'*inquietudine* umana" (my emphasis). Arcari's choice of the word 'inquietudine' ('uneasiness') in his closing sentence is interesting: while Arcari himself appears to profess a strong preference for the Dantean Lucifer, his association of the word 'Satan' with the mild-sounding concept of human 'unease' suggests that it is a correspondingly humanized Devil that by the time of writing the entry dominated twentieth-century understandings of the figure — even, so it would seem, for Arcari.

The final section of the entry, by Carlo Bricarelli, focuses on Satan in iconography and, disappointingly, only discusses visual interpretations of the Devil up to and including in Michelangelo's *Last Judgement*, thus failing to provide an analogue to Arcari's discussion of Satan's literary developments. Bricarelli identifies but one shift in Satanic iconography, from the various animal incarnations in Christian antiquity (such as serpents and dragons) to the "figure mostruose inventate […] dalla fervida fantasia medievale, ibride mescolanze di umano e di belluino, che assai frequentemente dovettero esprimere il maligno" and which the Renaissance masters, such as Michelangelo and Luca Signorelli, perfected, finding "anche per questo disperato argomento gli accenti più adatti ad accordare efficacia e decoro."

The entry ends on this note, leaving the reader with a strange combination of sixteenth-century aesthetic (Satan in iconography) and nineteenth-century signification (Satan in literature) in mind that, regardless of either entry-writer's intentions, blends the two together in a way that recalls Nattini's Lucifer, even though that particular iteration of the Devil is not referenced in the

entry.[65] Nattini thus seems to have painted a Lucifer for his times rather than a Lucifer for the *Commedia*, incorporating the evolutions the Devil underwent since Dante penned his masterwork that the Fascist Italian imaginary, represented in a microcosm in the *Enciclopedia Italiana* of the 1930s, appears to have adopted without much concern for the contradiction between this accepted image of Lucifer — Nattini was, after all, nominated for the first Mussolini Art Prize shortly after his Lucifer was unveiled to the public — and the pseudo-religious pedestal upon which it placed Dante's words.

4.3. Visualizing Fascist Morality

Nattini effectively retools Dante's Lucifer to present the viewer with a radical visual, ideological, and ethical re-interpretation of *Inferno* XXXIV that brings out a new vision of the *Commedia*, one that brings to the fore what the Lucifer specifically signifies in the Fascist imaginary. Nattini's Fascistized Lucifer entertains a relationship with Dante similar to the one between the poet and the Terragni-Lingeri Danteum discussed at the end of chapter 3, a projected building which incidentally would have housed the original watercolours on which the *Imagini dantesche* lithographs are based (Caputo 2020, n11). Ostensibly affording celebratory architectural and pictorial representations of Dante's *Commedia*, both works instead use the poem as a springboard from which to launch their reinterpretations of Dante's message, whereby they reframe the poet's condemnation of evil into a celebration of it.

In Nattini's illustration, this celebration is announced aesthetically through both the beauty of Lucifer's perfectly proportioned body and through the crystalline atmosphere that Nattini has reserved for the pit of hell, where darkness ought to be densest according to the poem. Nattini in fact builds up to this luminous end in his *Inferno* illustrations, effecting a reversal of Dante's crescendo of darkness by reserving a blackened 'sky' and light-less storm for his Limbo (*Inf.* IV; fig. 4.10 on page 80) and Circle of the Lustful (*Inf.* V; fig. 2.4 on page 27) respectively, whilst all three of his scenes in Cocytus (*Inf.* XXXII-XXXIV; figs. 4.10, 2.12 [page 33], and 4.1 [page 73]) share a common brightness for which Lucifer appears to be the source.

[65] I leave aside Ricciotti's opening section on the historical-theological Satan because Arcari chronologically picks up where Ricciotti leaves off in his discussion, making the end of the first section less memorable than the ends of the other two.

Figure 4.10: Nattini *Inferno* XXXII (P)

The crystalline atmosphere of Nattini's pit of hell makes it seem paradise-like, opening the image up to a moral ambiguity that is compounded by his angelically vulnerable prince of evil, whose open posture and disarmingly sympathetic affect coupled with the rising motion of his body emerging from the ice and his upward gazes is presented, to borrow Arcari's description of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lucifers in the *Enciclopedia*, as a *vinto di ieri* who will be the *vittorioso di oggi e di domani*. His still present ghost of a halo further appears to imply that he has been wrongly cast down, rewriting him as betrayed angel rather than fallen betrayer. This role reversal comes with contentious implications, calling into question from whence comes the source of moral authority since Lucifer, at least in the *Commedia* that Nattini is illustrating, is supposed to be the epitome of moral evil, thrown down from heaven by the hand of God, whom he betrayed, and now trapped in abject misery. Yet Nattini's pensive Devil stands tall, still seemingly fulfilling the office of light-bearer for which he is named and apparently untainted by his fall, suggesting that, in the world represented in the *Imagini*, God and Lucifer have exchanged roles if not stations: Lucifer is in hell not for betraying God, but because he has been betrayed by God.[66] The Devil, at this point commonly a symbol of the defeated, rising up — and looking up! — further implies that his wrongful imprisonment in the frozen Cocytus is in the process of being set right.

[66] The trope of betrayal, or *Dolchstoßlegende* ('stab-in-the-back'), is central to the transnational Fascist ethos. Originating in Germany as a disingenuous explanation for the country's swift and crushing defeat at the end of World War I after it had seemed to be dominating throughout the conflict, the *Dolchstoßlegende* became a founding myth for German Nazism and has since been adopted countless times by radical right-wing political groups globally; for a fuller discussion, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (2003), *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era* edited by Jenny Macleod (2008), and *The Stab-in-the-Back Myth and the Fall of the Weimar Republic: A History in Documents and Visual Sources* edited by George S. Vascik and Mark R. Sadler (2016). While Italy does not feature prominently in the literature on the *Dolchstoßlegende* myth, the trope of betrayal is easily observable in Italian Fascist political discourse, especially in relation to the military defeats and compromises during and in the immediate aftermath of WWI for which it criticized the previous Liberal governments.

Nattini does not carry forward this symbolic reversal of light and dark, heaven and hell, into the remaining two canticles, but he does not need to: as previously discussed in relation to the Danteum itinerary, the Fascist imaginary does not require that the ensuing contradiction be resolved. This is because Fascism thrives on contradiction, seeking to carve for itself a space in the tension that exists within a contradiction, a feat by which it proudly defines itself. Mussolini's elaboration of the doctrine of Fascism for the *Enciclopedia* is riddled with contradictions: Fascism is 'more left than left' and 'more right than right,' it pledges to collaborate in upholding peace but simultaneously pledges to prepare for war, it seeks, at least until the late 1930s, to be everything for everyone, using the ambiguity of its ideology as a strength.

Likewise, Fascism claims for itself the role of 'Italy's conscience' but does not really establish any fixed moral guidelines, preferring to embrace whatever suits its purposes in any given moment. Like Nattini's Lucifer, Fascism equivocates right and wrong, left and right, heaven and hell. It would seem that the tension in these equivocations is what fuels Italian Fascism, providing it with a forceful energy and a dangerously ambiguous morality. The only thing on which Fascism is inflexibly clear is on demanding loyalty to the Fascist state: "Tutto nello Stato, nulla fuori dello Stato, nulla contro lo Stato." Betrayal or treachery is understood only in terms of high treason, as evidenced by the 1937 *Enciclopedia* entry "TRADIMENTO" which describes in detail the punishment reserved for this crime, implying that only the State can be betrayed, and that to betray the State is the most reprehensible act imaginable. Anything done in the name of the Fascist State and for the advancement of its goals and interests would thus be considered 'good'; evil is what limits, opposes, or impedes the Fascist State in its endeavours.

From a Fascist perspective, Nattini's betrayed Lucifer can be read as an embodiment of Italy rising from the shackles of its historical subjugation to the Church and to other foreign powers, as well as its position of limited influence in international politics, to regain its rightful place as the world's moral and cultural leader through the indomitable spirit of Fascism that, recently awakened, will take Italy to new heights of glory, international leadership, and prestige. In this regard, the Lucifer's debut on the international art scene in Paris in 1931, where it stood as a rising conqueror in a crowded exhibition hall at the Jeu-de-Paume through the machinations of an Italo-French committee with Mussolini's personal endorsement, sent a symbolic message through which Fascism announced its cultural imperialist intentions and its understanding of

itself as a natural world leader to whom the world, and perhaps especially the European colonizing powers such as France, who had both colonized Italy and subsequently limited its ability to expand its territory, owed a long overdue debt of reverence and deference.

The timing of the Lucifer's completion, both socio-historically and within the progression of Nattini's work on the *Imagini* specifically, contributed to the creation of this effect, whereby Fascism seemingly saw an opportunity and acted upon it to frame the painting within its cultural imperialist designs. In several ways, for instance, Nattini's *Inferno* XXXIV illustration is the true finale of his *Commedia* cycle, the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* segments coming after it like less popular sequels because they fail to build up the same excitement and anticipation as the *Inferno*. I do not say this to denigrate the quality of the later *Imagini* — my personal favourites are the illustrations Nattini devotes to the Earthly Paradise at the end of *Purgatorio* (especially cantos XXIX and XXXII)— but there is no denying that the closing illustrations to the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* segments of Nattini's *Commedia* cycle do not strike the viewer with the same gravitas as the Lucifer, nor did the illustrations to those canticles benefit from the decade of in-progress exhibitions leading to the completion of the *Inferno* that planted and nurtured rising expectations in the public heart and cathartically released them with the reveal of the Lucifer, which remained the largest of all one hundred illustrations. Both Nattini's *Purgatorio* and his *Paradiso* end with illustrations smaller than *Inferno XXXIV*, and while this is not noticeable in the printed volumes in which each of Nattini's original watercolours is reproduced in colour lithograph plates of the same size, this would make the original illustrations to *Purgatorio* XXXIII and *Paradiso* XXXIII seem less important than the one for *Inferno* XXXIV in an exhibition setting.

Moreover, Nattini's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* XXXIII are compositionally less interesting than his *Inferno* XXXIV: the eye is primarily drawn to the grove of trees in the centre of the illustration to *Purgatorio* XXXIII (see fig. 4.11), and Nattini's *Paradiso* XXXIII is too similar to the plethora of religious frescoes devoted to heaven to truly arrest the viewer's gaze (see fig. 4.12). The colours in each of these illustrations may be richer and brighter, but they do not command the viewer's attention with the same force as the Lucifer, whose pensive gaze

Figure 4.11: Nattini *Purgatorio* XXXIII (P)

Figure 4.12: Nattini *Paradiso* XXXIII (P)

hooks the viewer's and draws them in, compelling them to ponder what this vulnerable titan is thinking about and to sympathize with him, moved by the pathos of his softly contoured strength in its non-threatening pose. The novelty of Nattini's *Imagini* would likely also have worn off by the time he began exhibiting his *Purgatorio* illustrations, given the protracted execution of the *Inferno*, and the much shorter production timeline for the later canticles, like their closing illustrations, would make them seem less important — not to mention that, arguably, even if Nattini had spent as long on the later canticles as the first, the pace of production would have been too slow to keep public interest invested in his project with anywhere near the level of enthusiasm that characterized the reception of the *Inferno*.

The *Imagini dantesche* project also reached a plateau from which it would have been difficult to continue ascending with the fanfare of the 1927 Roman and 1931 Milanese and Parisian exhibitions that showcased the completed *Inferno*, as those events were orchestrated with the highest amount of pomp possible. As I note in greater detail in chapter 3, the Fascist regime, and Mussolini personally, became much more interested in Nattini's *Commedia* illustrations in those years, and it is likely that Rino Valdameri, Nattini's Fascist cultural-promoting financier, would have fanned and fostered that flame of interest with the upcoming Fascist *decennale* in mind. The late 1920s and early '30s is also when Italian Fascism arguably got into its stride,

comfortable and confident in its position as a dictatorial regime that had recently consolidated an all but permanent hold on political power and quelled all possibility of open opposition to itself by making such opposition illegal, and began to devote significantly more time and resources to sponsoring the arts following a cultural imperialist agenda. The completion of the *Inferno*, and the reveal of the Lucifer, marked a moment of high performance for Nattini, which became tied to, or absorbed within, a moment of high performance for Italian Fascism.

The Parisian exhibition of 1931 stands as evidence of this absorption and appropriation of Nattini's peak performance by Fascism which, in a sense, puppeteered Nattini through his Jeu-de-Paume success and thereby arrogated for itself a portion of the resulting prestige conferred upon the artist and his work. Much as Mattia Limoncelli described in his speech inaugurating the 1930 Maschio Angioino exhibition of the *Imagini*, Nattini and his illustrations became ambassadors for Fascist Italian cultural production abroad in the context of the Parisian exhibition that the Fascist regime had helped organize. By virtue of its size in comparison to the other illustrations on display alongside it, Nattini's *Inferno* XXXIV, with its distant, pensive, rising, soft yet strong Lucifer, would have been the *pièce de résistance* regardless of where it was placed, presiding over the steady stream of visitors whose volume and enthusiasm assured the exhibition a resounding success and 'conquering' the Parisian public, to borrow once more Jean d'Ivray's comment on the exhibition in *Le Miroir du Monde*, so effectively that it occupied the Jeu-de-Paume ten days longer than originally planned.

In a sense, Nattini's conquering, light-bearing Lucifer, in the way it was painted and most importantly in the way it was revealed to the public, became an unofficial ethical manifesto of Fascism. Like the Danteum designs, Nattini's Lucifer fits within Italian Fascism's myth-making discourse about itself, enabling a visualization of how Fascism thought of itself and its role in Italian history and society as 'conscience' and fearless 'saviour,' standing in an alternative (and superior) position to religious morality and the Catholic Church, and at the same time constantly wary of betrayal, prepared to defend its interests by any means necessary. As with the end of the Danteum trajectory, the contradictions in what the Lucifer symbolizes reflect the problematic contradictions at the heart of Fascism's conception of itself; approaching Fascism through its cultural production thus provides an opportunity to understand Fascism on its own terms, which in turn fosters the development of a more nuanced and meaningful engagement with a complex

period in Italian history that has often been over-simplified in a misguided attempt to move on from it without acknowledging the profoundness of its impact on Italian culture and society.

Nattini's presence in his image as the model for the Lucifer further speaks to the fundamental role played by artists in crafting the public image of Fascism. In positioning himself so prominently within his illustration cycle, and as such an important, retooled figure no less, Nattini marks his Lucifer, the beautiful, betrayed, powerful, yet ultimately defeated light-bearer, as an artist, guiding the way but compromised in the process. The Lucifer in this sense represents both the role of the artist under Fascism, free to create so long as the creation can be absorbed into a Fascist optic, and Fascism itself as an artist, molding Italy into its image through Mussolini's aesthetic politics.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I have sought to re-situate Nattini's *Imagini*, and his Lucifer specifically, within its Fascist context, and to comment on what the illustrations themselves reveal using the images, rather than Dante's poem, as my point of departure. In so doing, I hope to have started a conversation about Nattini's *Imagini* that opens them up to further study and enables us to move beyond the uncritical appraisals that have hitherto characterized scholarly discussions of this particular *Commedia* cycle. My research, while it is itself only a beginning, already demonstrates that previous studies have over-emphasized what is essentially an illusory 'perfect image-to-text fidelity' in the *Imagini dantesche* to the detriment of our understanding of Nattini's much richer, more nuanced, and production-context-influenced illustration project.

Nattini's edition of the *Commedia* is explicitly marked by its colophons as a Fascist cultural product: while it may have originated as a project meant as an homage to Dante upon the six hundredth anniversary of his death, all three of the volumes were published a decade or more later, with the *Inferno* specifically completed in time for a *Fascist* — not Dantean — anniversary year (the *decennale*). Nattini's financier, Rino Valdameri, was a Fascist party member involved in Fascist cultural promotion from 1922 to 1943. Copies of Nattini's illustrated *Commedia* were used as political gifts, to Mussolini, Vittorio Emanuele III, Pope Pius XI, and even Hitler. These facts cannot be ignored: they are clear evidence that Nattini's *Imagini*, like many other artistic endeavours of the period and like many past Italian cultural icons, were appropriated by the regime for the purpose of increasing Fascist Italy's prestige as well as its presence and influence abroad.

This socio-political context is crucial to fully understand Nattini's *Commedia* cycle and to see the *Imagini* for what they are: paintings produced in a specific time and place with which they are necessarily in dialogue because nothing is created in a vacuum. Examining Nattini's work in its socio-political context tells us more about the *Imagini* than analyzing them exclusively in relation to Dante's poem ever could. It also tells us more about Fascist Italy and, in the case of the Lucifer specifically, its muddled ethical universe, which is reflected through what Fascism chose to endorse, appropriate, and reinterpret in Italian culture.

Moreover, as phenomena such as 'cancel culture' become increasingly prevalent in the twenty-first-century, facilitated in no small part by the ease with which communities can begin

— and end — discussions and debates via online platforms, it correspondingly becomes ever more crucial to engage critically with cultural artifacts past and present and to contextualize cultural production in a more honest and meaningful way. To 'cancel' Fascist cultural production, or to present it in a decontextualized manner, does violence to the artifacts and to our understanding of cultural history. While it can be uncomfortable to acknowledge an artifact's ties to social and political contexts considered problematic, it is essential that we do so in order to properly see the artifact for what it is. For Nattini's *Imagini dantesche*, this means that we need to do away with the false image the notion of his 'textual fidelity' to the *Commedia* has hitherto perpetuated in order to be able to see the interplay between art, politics, and morality that is at work in this Fascist cultural product.

Much research remains to be done before we can claim to understand this interplay between Fascist cultural production, politics, and morality. Cultural studies may prove to be the most promising approach to reach such an understanding: scholars such as Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Barbara Spackman, and Emily Braun have already begun to re-examine Fascism from a cultural studies, rather than political science, perspective, and their work has demonstrated that such an approach is necessary to the development of a fuller and more accurate understanding of Fascist Italy. Through this thesis, I hope to have added a new thread to this on-going conversation.

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