



## From the centre of a square: Dante (Alighieri), Cesare (Battisti) and the 'militant' monuments

Under his austere gaze have passed thousands of visitors. Hundreds of protesters have demonstrated at his feet. He has watched the city grow and change with the economic boom and industrialization. He has witnessed the flood in 1966, the uprisings in 1968, the Sloi fire. Only the 1943 bombings made him shake a bit. For the last 125 years, the monument to Dante has always stood there, guarding over his Piazza and his gardens.

Dante, by now, *"l'è un de Trènt"*, is one of us Trento citizens. And we don't notice him anymore.

After all, what could a statue dating back to 1896 ever have to tell us that could be interesting?

The answer is: more than we think.

Recent events have taught us that statues and monuments are never neutral. They are symbols, they summarize the spirit of the times in which they were erected and they can absorb new meanings and values through the centuries. So, if today Dante's statue goes almost unnoticed ... at the time of its installation it caused quite a turmoil.

It was the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the wind of nationalism was sweeping through Europe. In city squares, statues of the 'patriots' were popping up like mushrooms, a 'war' of the monuments that heralded quite another kind of war. Words such as 'identity', 'homeland', 'borders', 'foreigners' were being obsessively thrown around.

So, Dante's monument in Trento was conceived in such circumstances. And underneath its habitually polished and gentle appearance, the city was a powder keg.

You might ask: why would a statue *dedicated to Dante, of all people*, be erected in Trento?

The choice was not a casual one, of course, but rather reflected the political and social climate of that time. Trentino was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the act of placing an almost 18 m high statue of Dante in the middle of one of the city's busiest places was a way of expressing the Italian spirit of Trento and of its citizens ... or at least of its ruling classes.

The gesture the poet is making is equally interesting. What is Dante doing with that right arm stretched out towards the north and that frown on his face? Is he flagging down a taxi to get downtown? Or maybe he is trying to say *"stame lontan"* (stay away from me), a peremptory expression in the Trento dialect that underlines the importance of social distancing?

None of the above, and here's why.

The idea and project for Dante's monument start blossoming in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the home of Guglielmo Ranzi, a member of the liberal party and an irridentist and supporter of the need to defend the Italian language and culture. Everything remains just an idea for a few years, until when the inauguration in Bolzano in 1889 of the monument to Walther von der Vogelweide, a medieval poet and symbol of that city's Germanic culture, turns the idea into a project. The monument is a punch below the belt for Trento's intellectuals that demands retaliation, and what could be better than a statue of Italy's poet *par excellence*?





So, Ranzi counterattacks with the added bonus of the support of Trento's podesta Paolo Oss Mazzurana. They create a committee for gathering the necessary funds and manage to collect 203,000 lire, 176,000 of which from the savings of Trentino's citizens.

The location chosen for erecting the monument are the grounds opposite the train station, an 'empty' area that was created when the Adige River was straightened. The city council immediately seizes the opportunity to give a new face to Trento and embrace its commitment to modernity. The place is earmarked to host a square and a city park, the perfect stage for those arriving by train. And with Dante's statue it would also be the setting for displaying the city's Italian spirit and a collective symbol to identify with.

So what did the Austrian authorities have to say about this? In the context of the Austro-Hungarian empire, that between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a mastodontic and multi-ethnic entity, manifestations of local identity were mostly tolerated. In this sense, Dante's monument played into its hands because it was symbolic of the pacific coexistence of the Italian and German languages in the County of Tyrol.

And so, in 1891 the call for bids for the monument's project is launched. The call is answered by 73 artists, 42 of which are admitted and, out of the sketches displayed at the Education building (now the Faculty of Sociology), the artistic board chooses that of the veritably Italian artist Cesare Zocchi.

To date, 'his' statue of Dante is considered to be the best ever of the great poet. The monument consists of bronze statues arranged around a granite base. At the bottom we see a magnificent Minos, portrayed as infernal judge, sitting on a dragon, with his chin propped on his hand as he waits for souls, an evident reference to Rodin's 'Thinker'. Above him, Dante and Virgil meet Sordello da Goito. The episode, taken from the 6<sup>th</sup> canticle of the poet's Purgatory, is not chosen at random. It refers, in fact, to the tercet in which Dante writes: *"Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello, / nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta, / non donna di provincie, ma bordello!"* (Ah, Italy, thou slave, thou inn of woe, / ship without pilot in a mighty storm, / not queen of provinces, but house of shame!).

At the third level there's Beatrice and at the top a gigantic Dante depicted as he advances with his arm outstretched towards the north with which the artist intends to signify a gesture of protection, but the irredentists first and the fascists later on interpret as an indication of Italy's borders.

The monument is inaugurated on 11 October 1896 in the pouring rain. Maybe because of this reason too, its official presentation to Trento's citizens occurs without much fanfare. Or also, and more probably, so as not to offer the Austrian authorities any excuse for stopping the ceremony.

These precautions fall short, however, because the German press slates the statue, stating it is an irredentist action masked as a cultural operation. On the other side, the Italian press praise Dante's monument as being a patriotic symbol – showing, to tell the truth, scarce knowledge of the local scenario.

In short, the tendency to simplify complex issues is not just a plague of our modern times but actually has distant ancestors. In an era in which communication becomes a weapon of political strife, the message is simplified in order to move the masses. And so, Dante's monument too transforms into a tool for propaganda, a symbol of pro-Italian Trentino citizens just like Walther in Bolzano is for the pan-Germanists.





This polarization becomes increasingly exacerbated in the following years that see a crescendo of lacerating divisions. Trento and Trentino hunker down behind trenches and reinforced concrete fortresses as WWI looms on the horizon.

In 1918, at the end of that sanguinary and devastating conflict, Trento wakes up Italian. It is by starting from the so-called 'redeemed' cities such as Trento that the 'new Italy' intends to consolidate its own foundation myth. Dante's monument works, but it is not enough. The propaganda machine also needs patriots and heroes. Better still, martyrs. Who are not difficult to find among the millions died in the First World War. Those from Trento are named Cesare Battisti, Damiano Chiesa and Fabio Filzi. You must have heard of them before, because every city in Italy has at least a street, a square or a school named after one of them. Battisti, Filzi and Chiesa are from Trento but they choose to become deserters and to fight with the 'enemy' – the Italian army. Captured in 1916, they are tried and sentenced to death for high treason. They are executed at Castello del Buonconsiglio in the rear courtyard that is then renamed the 'Fossa dei Martiri' (the martyrs' grave) and becomes a destination for patriotic pilgrimages.

This process of 'sanctification' is enthusiastically exploited by the Fascist regime, because it too needs symbols to legitimize its existence. Battisti is the perfect figure for this although it is also the most 'slippery', seeing that in life Battisti had been a fervent socialist. Notwithstanding, a mausoleum to cherish his remains is designed in a style that intentionally evokes classical antiquity. This is what we see today atop the Doss Trento hill behind the train station, and this is the artefact that every tourist when first visiting the city gazes up at in awe and asks: "Excuse me, is that a Greek temple up there?"

In actual fact, in the futuristic projects of the time, the Doss Trento was intended to host an 'Alpine Acropolis', a monumental complex inspired by the ancient Roman *castrum*. The Acropolis was never built, however, and the original project was abandoned, except for the National History Museum of the Alpine Troops, inaugurated in 1958 and recently revamped and expanded.

What about Battisti's mausoleum? After ten years of dispute and uncertainty, it was built according to the project by the Verona architect Ettore Fagioli and inaugurated on 26 May 1935. It is the resting place of Battisti's remains and contains a marble bust sculpted by the Trentino artist Eraldo Fozzer.

So, Trento involuntarily turns from the natural crossroads between the Alps and the Mediterranean into the symbol of the Italian spirit and of a homeland that is already on the brink of a new and tragic war.

But that's another story.

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