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The Proto-Romantic Politics of Reading: The Aesthetic Presence of Dante in the Cockney School

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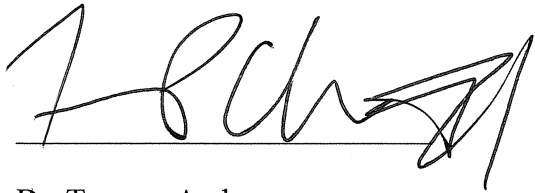
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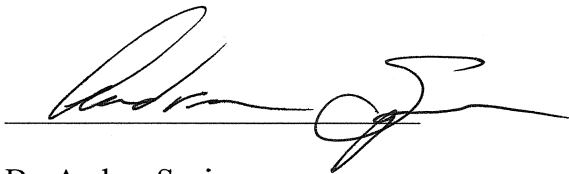
**The Proto-Romantic Politics of Reading:
The Aesthetic Presence of Dante in the Cockney School
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Abstract

Despite the long-standing popularity of the story of Paolo and Francesca among British Romantic poets and the already widespread readership of Dante's works during the early nineteenth century, Leigh Hunt's poem *The Story of Rimini* is unique in that it was among the first to make the story of Paolo and Francesca its centerpiece and to give the humanist, sympathetic treatment of the historical Francesca so characteristic of British Romanticism. Despite the controversy surrounding the poem's sensuality, its poetic style, and its political undertones, *Rimini* produced a dramatic ripple of interest in the story of Paolo and Francesca that reached some of the most influential members of Hunt's literary circle. In this analysis, I juxtapose *The Story of Rimini* with Keats's sonnet on the same subject, "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paulo and Francesca," and identify a stylistic similarity between the three authors that argues the relationship of pathos-based aesthetic judgments of immediacy as inherently linked to ethical judgment, inevitably politicizing literature. This stylistic relationship is evidence of the uniquely Dantean aesthetic undercurrent that is present in the poetry of the Cockney School. My reading of both *The Story of Rimini* and Keats's sonnet "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paulo and Francesca" suggests Dante as a common source of aesthetic influence for the two poets through the reactionary critical dialogue that their poetry sustains with the aesthetic implications of his text; however, it also supports a reexamination of Dante through the Cockney school, a reading of what I call the "proto-Romantic" aesthetics of the *Divine Comedy*.

Introduction

Though the reception of Dante throughout the course of British literature dates back as far as Chaucer, it unquestionably reaches its first peak during the mid-eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, very nearly paralleling the rise of British Romanticism in the wake of the Enlightenment. Current political trends among the middle class made the literary scene ripe for fresh interpretations of Dante. Along with their general reverence for Dante's poetic skill, many Romantic figures were fascinated by the episode of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, in which the pilgrim Dante, on the outset of his expedition through Hell, met the two lovers doomed to suffer eternal punishment for their lust and adultery; Hunt published his response to Francesca's plight in *The Story of Rimini* in 1816, and Keats was soon to follow with his own version of the tale in the sonnet "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca." The two poems pushed a wave of sympathetic interest in the episode during the remainder of the British Romantic period, evidenced by multiple poems, paintings, and translations of which Paolo and Francesca were the subject.

Setting the stage for Dante's critical reception among the Romantics is the medieval understanding of Dante's significance as both a literary and political figure prior to his revival in the mid-eighteenth century. Because of the extensive references to Dante's poetry sprinkled throughout Chaucer's verse, Dante was already a known entity in British literature as a vernacular poet and precursor to Chaucer, a way "to validate English as a likewise respectable means of literary expression"; however, as Jackson Boswell notes in *Dante's Fame in England: References in Printed British Books 1477-1640*, even before this surge of interest in the Sommo Poeta took hold, the reception of Dante was never limited to the sphere of poetry alone (Boswell

xv). Dante was known among the English as anything but a politically neutral figure, and was frequently invoked by religious writers, historians, and poets alike as a “proto-Protestant... Translators of popular Italian writers (Aretino, Boccaccio, Castiglione, Macchiavelli, Petrarch, among others) might cite Dante’s contributions to poetry and eloquence of expression, but Englishmen would, by and large, view him as a polemicist” (xv-xvi). Rather than the *Divine Comedy*, it was Dante’s work *De Monarchia*, an invective against papal overreach in the Italian government advocating the supremacy of secular rather than religious rule, that was the most frequently cited work during this time period, and it was utilized as one of the literary weapons in the aftermath of the Reformation to validate criticisms of papal rule and to anchor such radicalism in the literary voice of a canonized Italian poet, “one of Rome’s own,” in order to “lay claim to intellectual objectivity” (xv). The history of Dante’s perception in the British literary canon is that of a political chess piece as well as a literary giant and pioneer of poetry in the vernacular, a legacy which paved the way for Romantic readings of the *Divine Comedy* in the centuries to come.

Leigh Hunt, an underacknowledged but pivotal figure in this Dante revival, was not the first British author of his era to write about Dante. A renewed interest in *The Divine Comedy* and the translation and study of Italian poetry had been gradually gathering momentum since the beginning of the Enlightenment: during the early nineteenth century, a pair of lectures delivered by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, various publications about Dante’s works by the Italo-British critic Ugo Foscolo, and a variety of other publications encouraged interest in the area (Brand 327). Many histories documenting this current of influence leading up to the Romantics’ reception of Dante cite the Rev. Henry Francis Cary, who published the immensely popular first edition of his

translation of the *Inferno* in 1805 (with the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* soon to follow), as the figure largely responsible for Dante's introduction into the British Romantic literary consciousness. However, no single author was responsible for Dante's introduction to the Romantics; rather, his prevalence in Romantic texts was the sociopolitical culmination of a grassroots revival of interest in classic and medieval Western literature—Greek as well as Italian—that was spearheaded by the liberal Whigs of the time period. Alison Milbank, in *Dante and the Victorians*, notes that these same “antiquarian interests... have a political resonance in referring back to the mythical time of Gothic liberties, and the signing of Magna Carta... Italy for the whigs was the source (with Greece) of their aesthetic and political inheritance, and, like a Gothic monument, a ruin to be contemplated with melancholic nostalgia” (9). Similarly, Ayumi Mizukoshi notes a “Greek Revival” during the era and the use of “classicism as cultural luxury” in *Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure*, differentiating it from neoclassicism and paralleling its development with that of the rise of British nationalism in the wake of the Napoleonic wars (71). For the Romantics, therefore, Dante was not only a major progenitor of vernacular poetry and a Catholic iconoclast, but also representative of a long-standing aesthetic tradition in Western literature.

Contributing to this gradually reviving interest in Dante is the political journalist and poet Leigh Hunt, with his introduction of the poem *The Story of Rimini* to the British literary and political scene in 1816. A young middle-class liberal who struggled to find employment following the initial success of his first poetic publication *Juvenilia*, printed in 1801 at the age of 17, Hunt took up theatrical reviewing and later, with the same serendipitous success with which he began his career as a poet, political writing in 1807 for his brother John's journal *The*

Examiner. Ann Blainey, in her biography of Hunt, describes Hunt's inexperience with his political subject matter as a characteristic that made it oddly successful, that "this very lack of professionalism was his salvation. It brought to his work a freshness, sincerity, common-sense and scholarship which were unusual in journalism [for the time period]" (41). The success of the journal, which at its peak in 1812 sold more than 7,000 copies per week, catapulted Hunt to visibility among his scholarly peers (Blainey 42). Hunt, along with his brother John, thus became a well-known liberal journalist and self-proclaimed impartial critic in British literary circles. Blainey enumerates Hunt's political views as the following:

The brothers upheld the Monarchy, recognised the connection between church and state, and as loyal Englishmen opposed Napoleon; they aimed for "Reform in Parliament, liberality of opinion in general (especially freedom from superstition), and a fusion of literary tastes into all subjects whatsoever"... These impeccable principles did not prevent their launching sharp attacks on king, lords, commons, church and state, the conduct of the war, and any other policy or institution with which they disagreed.

(Blainey 42)

It was this fearless criticism of authority that landed Hunt in legal trouble for an article criticising military flogging in 1811, and later in jail (along with John) in 1813 for an *Examiner* article criticising the Prince Regent. During his incarceration, it became something "fashionable in progressive circles" to visit Hunt in prison, and it was during this two-year period that he became acquainted with many of the figures now regarded as the literary giants of British Romanticism, including Byron and Wordsworth, from whose work he began to derive his much-criticized poetic philosophy (68, 74). Hunt devoted himself to poetry-writing as a form of solace in prison, and some of his major works that he produced behind bars included *The Story of Rimini*, a poem

that elaborated upon the brief anecdote of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, and a work as politically motivated and overtly critical of Dante as were Hunt's *Examiner* pieces about the Prince Regent. As the following chapter explains in greater detail, Hunt's close involvement with political writing would have a great bearing on his critical reception of Dante and the development of his poetic style, just as it did on his popularity and success as a journalist and poet.

The years of Hunt's imprisonment also saw the advent of the younger poetic talent John Keats, who, during Hunt's incarceration, and despite an ongoing career as a surgeon's apprentice, had initiated a love affair with literature and begun to write verse. It is indisputable that without Hunt's relationship to the young Keats, the latter's poetic career would potentially never have existed. Charles Cowden Clarke, Keats's teacher (and later close friend) and acquaintance of Hunt's, introduced Keats to Hunt's work, which prompted a flurry of imitative poetry and verses in honor of Hunt (to whom Keats referred in his early works as *Libertas*), one of which included a sonnet in praise of the day Hunt was released from prison (Blainey 75). This view of Hunt as "*Libertas*" and the poetic master of Keats's generation, as well as Hunt's introduction of Keats to his community of fellow poets to boost his popularity, secured Hunt's historical role as "literary midwife at the birth of one of the great works of English literature," and the two poets' early approval of one another ensured Keats's full acceptance into the literary circle, soon to be called the Cockney School, that was growing up around Hunt; the close relationship between the two is also visible in the appearance of elements of Hunt's style in Keats's early work (92). In 1819, Keats would write a sonnet on the same episode from Hunt's *Rimini*, "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca," and it is in this

work that certain aspects of his stylistic and aesthetic relationship to Hunt—and to Dante—stand out most.

In tracing Dante's influence during this period, especially through the poetry of Keats and Hunt, contemporary critics have often commented on the traces of his influence on British Romantic aesthetics; such a discourse is situated within a larger discussion of what Marc Redfield, in *The Politics of Aesthetics: Nationalism, Gender, Romanticism*, calls "the vexed interplay of aesthetics and politics" (9). Redfield's account juxtaposes traditional aesthetes and cultural critics in a "discourse of the body," the former camp arguing, as Edmund Burke did, that aesthetic "taste" was in essence "a form of knowing inherent to sensory apprehension," and further notes that

The body, in this empiricist aesthetic, serves as the formal outline of humanity. It tropes what Kant calls the *sensus communis*: the field of essential communicability to which aesthetic judgment testifies, and upon which it depends. (Redfield 11)

Redfield goes on to acknowledge the paradox of the naturalness of the body's sense of taste and the necessity of educating it through acculturation as the source of the realization that such a philosophy encouraged a national sense of aesthetic culture that "achieves representation only in and as an acculturated minority," a "disinterestedness" in which "the empirical subject transcends its class interests in a moment of contact with the formal identity—the transcendental body, as it were—of humanity" (12). This cognizance of the "bourgeois ideology" of aesthetics became the catalyst for cultural criticism, which sought to perpetually situate aesthetics within its political and historical context. Though Redfield embarks upon a subsequent critique of the interplay between aesthetics and politics that is beyond the scope of this analysis, this criticism nevertheless highlights the political significance of Hunt's and Keats's attempts to establish

aesthetic distance from the political in *Rimini*, as well as situates both authors' poetry within the framework of aesthetic discourse that lays the groundwork for a comparison of their work with the aesthetic undercurrent of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Such a discourse surrounding the role of aesthetic judgment, as we shall see, is an integral part of the critical dialogue that the two Romantic authors sustain with the story of Paolo and Francesca in Dante's text.

Ayumi Mizukoshi's criticism of the two authors focuses on Hunt's appropriation and re-shaping of elements of the "great" poets of British literature, specifically Spenser, and the role of this strategy in developing both Hunt's and Keats's style as Cockney poets. Though the broader scope of Mizukoshi's argument examines how Keats and Hunt create a general "aesthetics of pleasure" in her work, her discussion of Hunt and his aestheticization of nature is particularly relevant here. Mizukoshi argues that Hunt's style, in *Rimini* as well as in many of his other poems, tends to feature idealized nature landscapes in order to create an immersive and enjoyable experience for the reader; to do this, Hunt engages in what Mizukoshi calls a "commodification of Spenser," deliberately "reinvent[ing] him as a sensual pastoralist, so as to make Spenser more marketable and more suited to widespread aesthetic consumption... an object of luxury consumption for middle-class reader-consumers" (63). To do this, Hunt specifically reimagines the *locus amoenus* and all its traditional symbolic significance in Spenser as a place of temptation and moral trial:

Francesca's bower of bliss derives from the literary tradition of the *locus amoenus*, chiefly from Acrasia's Bower and Alcina's isle, as well as from suburban gardens and parks. In both Spenser and Ariosto, the pagan enchantress seduces the Christian warrior into carnal pleasure and moral depravity. However, Hunt does not delve into

the sinister implications inherent in any earthly paradise, but instead quickly restores the moral innocence of the golden age. (Mizukoshi 68)

As Mizukoshi goes on to note, there is a distinctly political bent for this removal of Francesca's "Bower of Bliss" from its ordinary symbolic context: Hunt's "gardenesque aesthetic in his poetry promote[d] a distinctly middle-class ethos" and was born of a "democratising attitude towards nature," a deviation from the Wordsworthian natural sublime and a version designed more for popular appeal and enjoyment than the reading of Spenser as a "didactic moralist," and frequently had the opposite of the desired effect—Hunt, along with other Cockney poets, was often seen as an undereducated and presumptuous pretender to the Wordsworth poetic tradition (48, 50, 63). In Mizukoshi's text, this commodification of Spenser has no connection to Dante; however, my own discussion of Hunt's aesthetic design in *Rimini* closely mirrors Mizukoshi's representation of *Rimini*'s design as a universally consumable and appreciable poem outside of the circle of British literary elite.

Finally, Ralph Pite's criticism of Hunt's and Keats's work in *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* perhaps most closely approximates my own argument in its examination of Keats's work and its equal stylistic and aesthetic debt to both Hunt and Dante. Focusing on several of Keats's sonnets, as well as his later work *The Fall of Hyperion*, Pite argues that Keats's first exposure to Dante was through Hunt's poem *The Story of Rimini*, and that much of Keats's early work was characterized by stylistic borrowings from the poem, differing only in that these sonnets "[highlight] the artificial quality of all poetic effects—an artificiality which Hunt's writing sought to disguise and claimed to avoid" (119). This artificiality, Pite argues, is visible in Hunt's transformation of what would have been the more Miltonic, sublime "earthly paradise" into a "pleasure-garden," and was refined by Keats in his

later attempts to portray poetry as a universal in which readers found escape and solace (146). However, Pite's analysis of Keats's sonnet "This pleasant tale is like a little copse" is where his argument diverges from mine. Citing Keats's metacommentary on his own construction of the poem ("This pleasant tale is like a little copse:/ The honied lines do freshly interlace,/ To keep the reader in so sweet a place,/ So that he here and there full hearted stops"), Pite notes Keats's active engagement with his own role as an author and intercessor between the reader and the aesthetic experience of the text:

Keats's assertion of an identity between the narrative, in which the speaker enters a copse, and its formal construction, in which the lines create an interwoven barrier like the branches of a wood, declares the poetic and artificial nature of the effect as a whole... in Keats's reading the rhythms of exploration and of poetic composition are indistinguishable. (Pite 124-5)

Here Pite astutely points out Keats's awareness of the conscious construction of a narrative by an author in order to keep the reader in "so sweet a place" that experience seems represented rather than merely described (123-4). Having noted this feature of Keats's writing as a mark of his debt and critical response to Hunt, Pite attributes various other features of Keats's style involved in achieving this "sweet place" to both Milton and Dante. However, he remains fixated on Milton as the chief source of Keats's aesthetic approaches to his work, arguing that Keats emulates the Miltonic sublime pathetic as a means of engaging the passions of his readers, recognizing that "eternal sorrow and infinite regret are softening and dissolving; they overpower a reader's sense of his or her self" (130). Though Pite makes good points about the critical role of this Miltonic influence as a continuation and refinement of Keats's reception of Hunt's work, he stops short of recognizing the extent of Dante's influence in his poetry, and he does not examine one of Keats's

most direct dealings with Dante's work: the dream sonnet in response to both Canto V of the *Inferno* and Hunt's *The Story of Rimini*.

In the following analysis, I juxtapose *The Story of Rimini* with Keats's sonnet on the same subject, "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paulo and Francesca," and trace this same aesthetic problem that Pite addresses in order to establish the uniquely Dantean aesthetic undercurrent that bridges the relationship between the two. Though previous critics have touched on Hunt's aesthetic influence on Keats, none yet have attributed this to Dante; and, in their examinations of Dante's aesthetic influence on either poet, no critic has yet examined Dante as a common denominator that links the two. My reading of both *The Story of Rimini* and Keats's sonnet "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paulo and Francesca" suggests Dante as a common source of aesthetic influence for the two poets through the critical dialogue that their poetry sustains with his text; however, it also supports a reexamination of Dante through the Cockney school, a reading of what I will call the "proto-Romantic" aesthetics of the *Divine Comedy*.

I. *The Story of Rimini*: Hunt as Seminal Figure in the Cockney School

In his preface to *The Story of Rimini*, published in 1816 in the *Edinburgh Review*, Leigh Hunt acknowledges that his treatment of Paolo and Francesca from Canto V of Dante's *Inferno* is in many ways representative of a commonly held attitude toward Dante's tale of the two lovers: this particular tale had "long been admired by the readers of Italian poetry" as the most "cordial and refreshing" of the many—often gruesome—historical and mythological anecdotes in the *Inferno*, and was a story of which the Italians themselves were "very fond" (478). As Hunt goes on to mention, the same episode is referenced in the works of the Italian poets Petrarch and

Tassoni, and an account detailing the brief history of the two lovers is recorded in Boccaccio's *Esposizioni*. However, despite the long-standing popularity of the story of Paolo and Francesca and the already widespread readership of Dante's works during the early nineteenth century, Hunt's poem is unique in that it was among the first to make the story of Paolo and Francesca its centerpiece and to give the humanist, sympathetic treatment of the historical Francesca that would become so characteristic of British Romanticism. Despite the controversy surrounding the poem's sensuality, its poetic style, and its political undertones, *Rimini* produced a dramatic ripple of interest in the story of Paolo and Francesca that reached some of the most influential members of Hunt's literary circle. Among the poets whose works bear his mark of influence are Keats and Byron, both of whom wrote poetry romanticizing Francesca; and Cary would later praise *Rimini* in a footnote to Canto V in the 1819 edition of his enormously popular translation of the *Inferno*. There was a similar surge of artistic interest in the story, and artwork featuring Paolo and Francesca became abundant in the years following *Rimini*'s publication in 1816.

Early critics of Hunt argued that the appeal of his poem had little to do with his technical skill; in their often disparaging remarks about his style—a poetic system that even Byron found “disfiguring” and one Romantic critic condemned as “that silly scheme of poetical reform of which he vainly aspires to be the founder”—readers attacked it not only for its radical political connotations and overt sensuality, but for its contrived-sounding poetic style and clumsy construction. More recent critics, such as Alison Milbank and Ralph Pite, have properly called the poem more or less “successful” in spite of its technical deficiencies. However, though much of the attacks on Hunt's style are relatively well-founded, the majority of criticism of *The Story of Rimini* tends to obscure and de-emphasize the dialogue that Hunt sustains between *Rimini* and

the works of Dante. As I will argue, Hunt's poetic style in *Rimini*, however ungainly, cannot be merely dismissed or ignored: it is an essential part of understanding the ways in which he read and interpreted Dantean aesthetics and literary politics, as well as a major link to other Romantic poets' treatments of the same subject. Through an analysis of Hunt's diction and poetic style, I will emphasize the role of his text as a critical response to Dante's poetry rather than a simple poetic elaboration upon a single canto. In doing so, I will reveal *Rimini*'s substantial stylistic debt to Canto V of the *Inferno*, examining it in the context of its stylistic successes and failures, as well as illuminate Hunt's role as a significant connection between Dante and British Romantic aesthetics.

The socio-political atmosphere of London during the early 1800s played a decisive role in both Hunt's reaction to the story of Francesca and the extent to which his critics and audience were receptive to his work. As chief editor of the controversial *Examiner* and one of the ringleaders of a newly developed liberal literary circle, Hunt was a polarizing political figure. More conservative publications such as *Blackwood's* viciously slandered the work of Hunt and the other members of his circle, and he swiftly acquired the reputation of a well-meaning and passionate, but nevertheless undereducated and presumptuous political radical who sought "to effect in poetry what revolution aspire[d] to achieve in politics" (Duff 26). Composing the majority of *Rimini* from a prison cell, Hunt was hardly unaware of the inflammatory potential of political literature, and was necessarily critical of the political overtness of the *Inferno*, throughout which Dante openly laments the disorder of his native Florence and the whole of Italy, and unhesitatingly populates the circles of Hell with numerous Popes and prominent political figures of his day. However, though there are many similar moments of overt political

criticism in *Rimini*, the poem does anything but pay homage to its Italian predecessor in this respect. Though intensely admiring of Dante's poetic voice, Hunt could not stomach his mixture of theology and politics, and in the preface to *Rimini* referred to the *Inferno* as a "sublime night-mare" and a "summary way of disposing of both friends and enemies" according to political and personal conflicts or alliances with the author, rather than for the sins of which Dante claimed the unfortunate souls to be guilty (Hunt viii). Though Hunt tenaciously continued to produce politically charged literature (poetry and editorials alike) even from prison, *Rimini* is, in a way, a response to this "sublime night-mare" of Dante's politics. It is an attempt to temper the political edge of his poetry, steering clear of what he called the "melancholy absurdity" of Dante's distribution of friends, public figures, and mythological characters throughout the circles of damnation in the *Inferno*.¹

However, hypocritically enough, Hunt was nearly as sharp-tongued about contemporary British politics in *Rimini* as he was in his political publications. Despite his efforts to minimize the political overtones of his work, an examination of the manuscripts of some of the poem's early drafts reveals that this subtlety was difficult for him to achieve. Hunt struggles at points to balance the barely disguised political undertones of the poem with the more romantic nature of the storyline and the effortless, natural-sounding poetic voice that he claims to possess in the poem's preface. Not only does he compare Francesca's feelings of marital entrapment to his

1 Though the poem itself makes fairly clear what aspects of Dante's "summary" damnation Hunt so disliked, the majority of Hunt's explicitly stated opinions on Dante's work are found in a two-volume work that he published much later (1846), *Stories from the Italian Poets*, in which Hunt launches a lengthy and vicious attack against Dante's haughty, oftentimes petty, personality and its alleged intrusion into the structure of the *Comedy*—a flaw that he argues ultimately compromises the religious integrity of the work. In the introduction to his translation of selections from the *Comedy*, Hunt also argues the arbitrary and unfair nature of Dante's categorization of souls into Heaven or Hell; he specifically cites two women (similarly guilty of lust) who appear—ironically enough—in the sphere of Venus in Dante's *Paradiso*, contrasting them with "Poor murdered Francesca" who simply "had no time to repent; therefore her mischance was her damnation!" (54).

own imprisonment, but his representation of both Guido and Giovanni (the first deceitful, the second authoritarian, unattractive, and unfeeling) as corrupt rulers who exploit Francesca's sense of duty for their own political gain echoes his scathing criticism of the Prince Regent printed in the 1812 issue of the *Examiner*, the same article for which he was later convicted for libel and imprisoned. Clarice Short, in "The Composition of Hunt's *The Story of Rimini*," reproduces one passage from a "rejected beginning" of *Rimini* that was never published with the completed poem. In this excerpt Hunt, describing the typical member of the Italian nobility, wrote—and then crossed out—the lines "Sure signs of an expiring royalty," "The driv'ling mirth of dying royalty," "The sapless sheets of fading royalty," and "The dancing death of sinking royalty," before finally settling for the equally ambiguous phrase "The fond neglect of sinking royalty" (209). These lines illustrate Hunt's hyper-awareness of overpoliticizing his poetry, as he strove to unite literature and politics in such a way that would allow for his work to more subliminally communicate a more general humanist and anti-authoritarian sentiment (as opposed to overt, Dantesque political invective) while still ensuring that his work would be read and digested by his audience as art.

The resulting poetic "system" that Hunt developed was a modified version of the return to the "simple and unelaborated expressions" that Wordsworth proposed in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth articulates a sort of "noble savage" theory of poetry—the essence of which is that a "low and rustic life" removed from the complexities of society is more conducive to experiencing human emotion "under less restraint," and therefore enables a person to articulate emotions in a more genuine manner, which in turn communicates essential truths of humanity (Wordsworth 78-9). It is worth noting that Hunt's imitation of this aspect of

Wordsworth's style is perhaps more readily apparent in *Rimini* than is his emulation of Dante, since Paolo and Francesca, finding sudden reprieve from their throngs of admiring subjects and sense of political duty in the rustic retreat of the garden, are so clearly motivated by the "essential passions of the heart" that Wordsworth describes; but in *Rimini*'s preface Hunt also adopts a position strikingly similar to that of Dante, who defended the use of the Tuscan vernacular in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* ("On Eloquence in the Vernacular"):

Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular: first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third because it is natural to us, while the other is, in contrast, artificial. (Botterill 1)

The ideas presented in this excerpt, especially the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" poetry, bear much resemblance to Hunt's explanation of his own poetic "system" in the preface to *Rimini*:

But the *proper* language of poetry is nothing different from that of real life... an actual, existing language,—omitting of course mere vulgarisms and fugitive phrases, which are the cant of ordinary discourse, just as tragedy phrases, dead idioms, and exaggerations of dignity, are of the *artificial* style, and yeas, verily, and exaggerations of simplicity, are of the *natural*. (xv-xvi, italics added)

Adding to this stylistic similarity is Hunt's later praise of Dante's poetic voice in *Stories from the Italian Poets*. Though interspersed among scathing criticisms of Dante's alleged failures as a poet, Hunt mentions the "passion" of Dante's verse multiple times in just the introduction to the first volume, calling him "the greatest poet for intensity who ever lived" who "excites a corresponding emotion in his reader" (ix-x). Hunt wholeheartedly embraces Dante's idea of

vernacular literature as it is employed in the *Divine Comedy*—poetry that “excites” and encourages the involvement of the reader with the text because of the authenticity and accessibility of the language in which it is written. Hunt’s diction therefore necessarily reflects his enthusiasm for simplistic, easily comprehensible narration and the accessibility of his text by a wider audience than the literary elite.

However, Hunt’s poetic diction in *Rimini* also reflects the considerable difficulty that he experienced in maintaining this organic and effortless style of writing that he advertised in his preface as a new, “freer spirit of versification” (xv). Hunt’s effort to compose poetry in a more “free and idiomatic cast of language” resulted in a contrived rather than natural-sounding style, and is better described as an imitative concoction of English poets whose verse most closely approximated what Hunt conceptualized as “proper” versification, such as the works of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. This strategy does not go unnoticed by critics of Hunt’s work. Alison Milbank notes some of his over-colloquial words and expressions that stand out the most: “many obsolete words are revived, such as ‘clipsome’... there are medieval-sounding coinages such as ‘franklier’, and old-fashioned inversions as in ‘up-screamed’” (22). An 1816 critic held a similar opinion, finding *Rimini* “often very affectedly negligent, and so extremely familiar as to be absolutely low and vulgar... We see no sort of beauty either in such absurd and unusual phrases as ‘a clipsome waist,’—‘a scatterly light,’ or ‘flings of sunshine,’ ...and an hundred others in the same taste” (*Edinburgh Review*, 491). Milbank attempts to excuse Hunt, arguing that he strategically employs the “awkwardness of his antithetical styles” for poetic effect (23); but in light of Hunt’s professed preference for poetic language identical to “that of real life,” the production of poetic “awkwardness” can hardly be considered a deliberate strategy,

and such a conscious juxtaposition of two different types of diction contradicts the aesthetic model of *Rimini*.

A close reading of *Rimini*'s third canto reveals the strategy behind Hunt's colloquial realism and its source in Dante's portrayal of Francesca. The passage involves much more than the ample usage of imagery—it is here, in the famous “garden scene” that, as Ralph Pite notes in *The Circle of Our Vision*, “Hunt has his readers discover it [the garden pathway] as they go” (121). But the reader is not kept at the “respectful distance” that Pite describes—the poem shifts into the second person as the physical description of the garden begins, placing the reader within the text of the story (66). The reader is then made to slowly traverse the garden pathway, noting its many picturesque natural features, as he proceeds to the pavilion where Francesca waits:

So now you walked beside an odorous bed
Of gorgeous hues, white, azure, golden, red;
And now turned off into a leafy walk,
Close and continuous, fit for lovers' talk;
And now pursued the stream, and as you trod
Onward and onward o'er the velvet sod,
Felt on your face an air, watery and sweet,
And a new sense in your soft-lighting feet. (66-67)

The narration in this section immerses the reader by engaging his senses as directly as possible. Hunt does not merely describe a sensation, he suggests that the reader is already feeling it; in addition to “felt on your face,” the passage includes other passive ways of suggesting sensations and tentatively guiding the reader's steps and gaze with phrases such as “perhaps you entered,” “a lovely sky of blue/ Clearly was felt,” “you might hear,” “the eye looked up,” and “to inward

peeping sight” (67-71). The sudden withdrawal from the third person omniscient perspective, together with the suspense generated by the slow, deliberate progression through the garden scene and the reader’s foreknowledge of the impending climax of the story, work to more deeply engage the reader with the text, so closely that it goes almost without notice when the story’s point of view shifts from second person back to third person via the passive voice: “so observed was she” (76). The route through the garden taken by the anonymous observer (previously, the reader) blends seamlessly into Paolo’s own exploration of the scene and his approach of Francesca’s pavilion. In this way, the text predisposes the reader to experience the scene from Paolo’s perspective.

By placing the reader so intimately within the story, the third party of the author is made invisible, and the artificiality of the text—that is, the reader’s consciousness that a fictional story is being narrated to him—seems to temporarily disappear. This effect is visible in Dante’s text as well as in Hunt’s, where Francesca participates in the same act. In the *Inferno*, she blames her actions and their consequences on the love story that she is reading when she commits the act of adultery (the tale of Launcelot of the Lake), claiming “Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse” (“a pander was the book and he who wrote it,” *Inferno* V 137); and the two lovers begin to imagine themselves as Launcelot and Guinevere in the story, imitating their kiss (133-36). Dante structures Canto V as layers of metacommentary on this peculiar power of literature: under the influence of the Provençal romance story of Launcelot and Guinevere, Francesca empathizes with the story’s adulterous characters until she herself succumbs to lust. Similarly, the pilgrim Dante (who has embarked on a quest for the sake of love) swoons and falls “como corpo morto” to the floor of Hell upon hearing Francesca’s tale, by which he is overcome with empathy and

pity; and the whole of Canto V itself is designed to provoke these same sentiments in the reader. In this way Dante argues that this textual empathy has a unifying effect, just as the kiss that Paolo and Francesca share in *Rimini* represents the full engagement of the reader with the text and the immersion of the imagination into the piece of literature. Hunt recalls the narrative of Dante's Francesca in the last line of *Rimini*'s third canto: "The world was all forgot, the struggle o'er;/ Desperate the joy.—That day they read no more" (78), echoing the conclusion of Francesca's tale: "Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante" (*Inferno* V 138). Rather than simply noting that Paolo and Francesca ceased to literally read, Hunt gives the line from Dante a double meaning—in the act of immersive reading, the reader's surroundings are, however temporarily, "all forgot"—the conscious act of reading disappears, and the reader begins to experience the text and empathize with it. The same moment in the story also explains Hunt's failure to execute his poetic strategy effectively—his vernacular overcompensation disrupts the narrative flow of the poem, reminding the reader of the presence of the author and therefore the artificial nature of the text. This technique of simulating reality with literature represents the core of Hunt's distinctively Romantic poetic strategy that he models after Dante's Francesca. An emotional engagement with the text, facilitated by easily comprehensible "everyday" language, is key to engaging the pathos of the reader.

Upon closer inspection, the aesthetic design of *Rimini*, perhaps more elegant in theory than in its execution, amounts to a voyeuristic sort of intimacy at best. Heightening the sense of remoteness and privacy in the garden scene is Hunt's insistent use of the term *bower* to describe the lovers' sequestered surroundings. Hunt uses the term three times in the third canto alone, each time as "a vaguely poetic word for an idealized abode" (*OED*). In this case, the word is an

indirect reference not only to the pavilion itself, but also to the houselike natural formations—“bowering leaves” and “citron bowers”—that the vegetation forms around it (Hunt 68, 69). Considering the sensual context of the scene, the double meaning of *bower* as “an inner apartment” or “bedroom” is particularly relevant here as well, a discreet enclosed space for the “bower-enshaded kisses” Hunt describes (*OED*, Hunt 70). Here, the reader’s empathy for the two lovers places him/her intrusively within the story, and his/her experience of the poem from Paolo’s perspective disguises the transgressive act of witnessing and enjoying the adulterous union of the two lovers. The palpable erotic details of the lovers’ interaction, too, make it seem that the reader is a participant in the scene rather than simply a voyeur: through the text one can even feel the slightly embarrassing “fuzzy” sensation of Paolo and Francesca’s cheeks touching “like peaches on a tree” (77). In this way, Hunt’s own text serves as a pander to its audience, placing the reader within the very “bower” of Paolo and Francesca’s act. But Hunt’s text takes this voyeurism one step further than the most obvious visible and tactile details of the scene, offering up to the reader even the most intimate internal sensations of the pair’s romantic excitement: as Paolo and Francesca “[feel] with leaps of heart/ Their color change,” so too may the reader feel a quickening of pulse and a blushing of the cheeks as the tension mounts in anticipation of the lovers’ imminent forbidden kiss (77).

It is this “forbidden” component of the pathos-driven encouragement toward immersive reading that would seem to draw the purpose of Canto V of the *Inferno* into question—both Hunt’s text and this section of the *Inferno* seem to be designed around this idea of transgressive readership and, in the case of *Rimini*, to encourage it. While the parallels to Hunt’s own political situation in *Rimini* clearly indicate the political component of his text, the strategy that Hunt uses

to develop it is indicative of a sort of literary politics that extends beyond the immediate political context of Hunt's poem, a technique ingrained in the reading of the poem itself that not only demands that readers call an idea into question, but also alters the way in which they do so, through empathy rather than through a certain code of ethics or logic. In essence, this supports an emotional and experiential, rather than logical, reading of the text; it draws connections to other Romantic aesthetic concepts such as negative capability and gestures to Dante's influence in their development. Hunt, therefore, becomes a fundamental link between Dante and British Romanticism, and turns from minor Romantic poet to pivotal figure in his re-negotiation of reading.

Hunt's entrance into the discourse of aesthetics and politics, however, is the place at which he truly becomes the connecting point between Dante and his British Romantic contemporaries. This is conceptualized in Hunt's portrayal of the figure of Francesca herself: a political figure as much as an idealized feminine one, Francesca grapples with the nationalistic notion of "duty" (in her case, her role as a political chess piece in an arranged marriage) when confronting her affection for Paolo. She nevertheless finds her own noble and patriotic efforts to resist her longing are in vain:

She seemed to have the more necessity
 For struggling hard, and rousing all her pride;
 And so she did at first; she even tried
 To feel a sort of anger at his care;
 But these extremes brought but a kind despair. (Hunt 61)

Hunt thus sets up Francesca's seemingly natural affection for Paolo in direct opposition to her sense of political duty. We see Hunt enter verbatim into this aesthetic debate in his narration of

Paolo's attraction to her: Francesca is "*taste* personified," and Paolo's feelings are "but the *taste* for what was natural" (55, 59, italics mine). Here Hunt attempts to de-politicize—even portray as strictly *apolitical*—the disinterested aesthetic judgment embodied by Francesca, only to double back and declare at the end of the third canto "Sacred be love from sight, what e'er it is," declaring Francesca's affair to be morally permissible—and thus re-introducing it to the political realm! Through this contradiction we see Hunt's own "vain effort" to distance the aesthetic from the political, only to finish the poem having done just the opposite in realizing an inextricable mixture of the two.

II. Keats, Dante, and Negative Capability

This Huntian narrative construction is a literary trend that continues throughout the Romantic period—especially through the poet Hunt perhaps influenced most, Keats, whose sonnet on the same story also sympathetically explores the lovers' suffering and desire from Paolo's perspective, and even finds peace in it. Keats's sonnet, "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paulo and Francesca," takes what might initially seem an odd and alternative approach to the episode of Dante's portrayal of Paolo and Francesca in torment, in which the narrator joins Paolo and Francesca in their hellish torment, with no hint of the desperation and misery with which Dante narrates the same episode. Keats describes the dream that inspired the sonnet in an 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats as "one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life" (Keats 326). Reprinted below is the sonnet as it was originally published in an 1820 edition of the *Indicator*:²

2 The June 28th issue of the *Indicator*, reprinted from Jeffrey N. Cox's anthology of Keats's work (336). As Cox notes, the original draft of the poem (inscribed inside Keats's copy of Cary's Dante) contains some key differences, namely the use of "whirlwind" as opposed to the *Indicator*'s use of "*world-wind*" (italics mine). Since

As Hermes once took to his feathers light,
 When lulled Argus, baffled, swoon'd and slept,
 So on a Delphic reed, my idle spright
 So play'd, so charm'd, so conquer'd, so bereft
 The dragon-world of all its hundred eyes;
 And, seeing it asleep, so fled away—
 Not unto Ida with its snow-cold skies,
 Nor unto Tempe where Jove griev'd a day;
 But to that second circle of sad hell,
 Where 'mid the gust, the world-wind, and the flaw
 Of rain and hailstones, lovers need not tell
 Their sorrows. Pale were the sweet lips I saw,
 Pale were the lips I kiss'd, and fair the form
 I floated with about that melancholy storm.

Unlike Hunt's reactionary disgust to Dante's treatment of the subject, in the same letter Keats unhesitatingly praises the sublime pathetic quality of the *Inferno's* fifth canto, remarking that it "pleases [him] more and more," fervently wishing to "dream it every night" (326). This attitude is not wholly inconsistent with other Romantic attitudes toward the episode, which expressed great admiration for the poetic execution of the canto, even if they did, like Hunt, retain a certain amount of indignation for what they saw as Dante's unflinching and cursory administration of justice (Crisafulli 125). It is, however, exactly in the vein of Hunt's escapist poetic design that Keats begins his sonnet; presented in the text just as it is in the aforementioned letter—as

this particular term could potentially be relevant to the present discussion of the reader, the poet, and the outside "world," I have elected to reprint the *Indicator's* version.

occurring within a dream—the poem’s events take place when the speaker’s external world is lulled asleep, represented here by the watchful hundred-eyed Argus of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, “the dragon-world of all its hundred eyes.” If we take Hermes and his “Delphic reed” to be synonymous with the voice of the poet—or poesy itself, in its ability to “lull” the outside world away or immerse the reader in a sort of alternate consciousness—then we may by extension understand Io, a victim of Zeus’s lusting after a mortal woman (much like Hunt’s and Dante’s Francesca is trapped between the possessive and vengeful desires of those around her), to be a representation of the reader who, ostensibly captive or suffering, benefits from this lulling of the monstrous world to sleep. Encapsulated in this particular reading of the sonnet, therefore, is a commentary on the same sort of poetic “system” proposed by Hunt, which through a variety of unfortunate stylistic choices seeks the same affective response from its readers in the text of *Rimini*.

But there is a slight inconsistency in the sonnet’s extended mythological metaphor; the “idle spright” of the poem is not only likened to Hermes, responsible for lulling the monster to sleep, but also is the figure who “seeing [Argus/the world] asleep, so fled away” as does Io, Hera’s prisoner for whom Hermes was sent in the first place (336). This curious overlap is key to interpreting Keats’s analogy. The unity of the poetic “spright” with the reader, along with its intentions implied within the text—fleeing to “that second circle of sad hell” as a means of escaping the vicissitudes of the outside world—hint at the presence of a much more extensive aesthetic model at work here. Not only does the narrator-reader “spright” experience the suffering in Hell sensuously and directly from Paolo’s point of view, echoing Hunt’s same narrative strategy, but this same narrator-reader union carries with it an assumed unity of purpose

with which narrator and reader approach a text, effectively effacing the difference between the two. Much like the insertion of the reader into the story through the use of second person address in the garden scene of *Rimini*, this subtle metaphorical fusion of Hermes and Io unites the roles of speaker, dreamer, and reader. The external, non-literary world, through the Delphic reed of the poem, is lulled asleep and thus is similarly “all forgot,” and the figure of the author once again seems to disappear, presenting the experience of the reader with the text as self-realized and self-guided.

But if Hunt’s poem has readers seeking solace in a sensuous edenic bower, how could Keats’s poem achieve this same affective response of solace “mid the gust, the world-wind, and the flaw/ Of rain and hailstones” in the Circle of Lust in Dante’s Hell? The interpretation of the next line is critical, and twofold. “Lovers need not tell/ Their sorrows” makes a literal reference to the concept of symbolic retribution in the *Inferno*, a system of punishment in which the nature of the torture suffered is meant in some way to mirror or mimic the nature of the sin being punished (those guilty of flattery, for example, are mired in filth, while the spiritual bodies of the Lustful are eternally buffeted about by a great gale symbolizing the unfortunates’ willingness to be buffeted about by earthly passions during their lifetimes). The suffering of Hell’s inhabitants, then, acts as a signifier of their lived experiences and their characters: Dante has only to place a particular soul within the web of spatially realized morality that he has created, and readers may automatically infer information about what sort of wrongdoing has been committed and has come to define that soul’s moral value. And yet the non-necessity of sinners telling their stories by virtue of symbolic retribution cannot possibly be the limit of Keats’s meaning—since the very reason that Hunt and Keats were so interested in Francesca was because of her piteous story, and

because she, like the others whom Dante encounters throughout his journey, does “tell [her] sorrows,” relating her tale of downfall into sin. The line seems instead to hint at the unspoken understanding of the sinners’ “sorrows” that is created between the suffering souls in the first circle and those who observe their plight—a role which, in Keats’s sonnet, is simultaneously occupied by the figures of both narrator and reader. This reading of the poem makes even more sense considering the end result of this figure “floating” along the gale of Hell in Paolo’s place, and, considering the line “pale were the lips I kissed” even approaches the exact same moment of textual union that is set up for the reader in Hunt’s text. This union, an understanding which can only be synonymous with empathy—is brought into being by the act of reading itself.

In the wake of Keats’s enormous debt to Milton and the idea of the sublime pathetic in his earlier works, it may seem initially difficult to pinpoint what about this poetic structure is so uniquely Dantean, especially since, as Pite has pointed out, works such as *The Fall of Hyperion* bear such a strong mark of Milton’s influence (129). Keats’s emulation of the Miltonic sublime pathetic, an idea that, as Pite notes, involves the elevation of mortal passion “recognisably human while lifted up into an immortal sphere” is a concept present in Keats’s “Dream” sonnet, but differs considerably from this reader-immersion style of narration so prevalent in *Rimini* and the fifth canto of the *Inferno*, a feature of Keats’s text that has more to do with negative capability, or the ability of a reader to “[be] in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” because “the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration” (125). This negative capability of Keats’s “A Dream, After Reading” is the fundamentally Dantean component of the poem. In the *Inferno*, upon engaging in the reading-like act of hearing Francesca’s tale, pilgrim-Dante feels a great sensation of sympathy

overwhelm him, saying “e caddi come corpo morto cade” (“I fell as a dead body falls”), appropriately closing out the canto as he swoons, he himself nearly becoming one of Hell’s dead shades in his moment of pity for Francesca’s story. This moment in the text is one of the layers in which Dante structures the reading experiences of Canto V—Francesca kisses Paolo after reading about such a kiss, and Dante, upon hearing Francesca’s tale of woe, has an instinctive reaction that imitates her state of being and her feelings of sorrow. Virgil, Dante’s allegorical sense of human reason, stands by while the events transpire, neither interfering nor rebuking him; and thus, in the absence of reason, pilgrim-Dante experiences what we might call a “negatively capable” reading experience. In such an act of empathetic union, an instantaneous and profound moral-aesthetic judgment has occurred. It is an emulation of just such an aesthetic judgment narrated to pilgrim-Dante within the text, and, by extension, a metacommentary and prediction of Dante’s own readers’ reactions to the canto as an instinctive pitying and defense of Francesca, just as pilgrim-Dante protests to Virgil (his own human reason): “O lasso!/ Quanti dolci pensier, quanto disio/ Menò costoro al doloroso passo!” (“Alas! What sweet thoughts, what desire/ Steered these to such a painful end!”) (19).

Finally, understanding the full significance of the politics of aesthetics within Dante’s text and its relationship to Keats’s concept of negative capability mandates a juxtaposition of Dante’s Francesca with the figure of Beatrice (allegorically, Divine Love) and both characters’ roles in the context of the poem’s analogical purpose as a whole. Beatrice, a historical figure who appears to pilgrim-Dante at the start of the *Inferno* to inspire his journey toward spiritual perfection, is in many ways antithetical to Francesca, who is narratively (though not spatially) positioned farthest from Paradise, and therefore appears earliest to pilgrim-Dante in his

progression from spiritual uncertainty in the dark wood of error to the summit of heaven. In Canto V of the *Inferno* we see poet-Dante's warning regarding the pitfalls of reading, as Francesca does, solely for delight; Dante's structuring of this canto implies the inextricability of moral judgments from aesthetic ones. However, it is pilgrim-Dante's entrance into the earthly paradise in the *Purgatorio* that complicates this simplistic interpretation. Here, Dante halts at the final step of the purification process, a walk through a wall of flame that is intended to purify him from lust (Francesca's sin), through which he refuses to pass until Virgil reminds him that Beatrice is on the other side (91). As Beatrice will remind Dante in a later canto, his perception of her upon entering the wall of flame is still corrupt and sensual even at this point, stemming from his earthly understanding of, and desire for, her love; yet he uses her image as a guide to cross into the Earthly Paradise and understand the religious ideal of Divine Love that she represents. Though the pilgrim's notion of it is corrupt, Dante hints at a kernel of the divine even within something portrayed as morally reprehensible, Francesca's lust; the text as a whole seems to ultimately argue *for* rather than against this experiential reading of texts of which pilgrim-Dante and Francesca are both seemingly guilty, as a part of the anagogical progression toward spiritual perfection. Divine Love in the *Comedy* is synonymous with the aesthetic undercurrent of universalism, the ability of all humans to perceive beauty and love. In the *Comedy*, this aesthetic forms the literal fundamental structure of the universe "che muove il sole e l'altre stelle" ("that moves the sun and other stars"), and, in Dante's theistic universe, it therefore cannot be extricated from morality (400). In Keats's work as well as in Hunt's, this idea persists in both the political and artistic realms, giving shape to the assumptions surrounding the purpose and definition of literature itself.

Conclusion

A close reading of these selected works of Keats, Hunt, and Dante reveals that they are closely interrelated, aesthetically as well as stylistically, and much more so than the previous history and criticism of Dante reception in British romanticism would suggest. All three engage in the discourse surrounding the relationship between aesthetics and politics in a surprisingly similar way, one that establishes a firm influential link between Dante and the Cockney School. On the one hand, this analysis yields a new understanding of Keats and Hunt that is more Dantean than before—we see this in the stylistic borrowing of the “vanishing author” figure, which facilitates the reader’s ability to “enter” the text and read for pleasure and empathy under the guise of “art for art’s sake,” and we see the same consummation of such a relationship through a hypothetical union between reader and text, symbolized in all three works as a kiss, an image representative of the reader’s engagement that is as physical and instinctual as it is passionate. Thus all three authors claim a fundamental link between the immediacy of aesthetic judgment with the act of reading, and—through the moral judgments that accompany them—imply the presence of a certain politics of reading in their work. The *Comedy*, *The Story of Rimini*, and “A Dream After Reading” all comment in varying ways on the possibility of aesthetic distance and the relationship between politics and aesthetics. Though Keats and Hunt attempt an aesthetic distance that Dante avoids, the transformative effect of the Romantic authors’ interpretations offers us an alternate, aesthetically based reading of Dante, one that helps us understand and group the Cockney Romantics according to their aesthetic ideology as it is expressed in their work. The subsequent development of the Romantic “cult of Francesca” in translation, poetry, and artwork also lends us a better understanding of the role of the Cockney

School, and that of Hunt in particular, in shaping the aesthetic and stylistic interests of Romanticism as a whole.

With respect to the scope and weight of literary influence, a key point which I hope to have made clear in this analysis is the multifaceted and interlacing nature of the network of influences, both ancient and contemporary, which shaped the poetry of Keats and Hunt—in the former of the two, namely Milton; in the latter, Spenser and Wordsworth. The implication of my argument is not that Dante necessarily supplants or surpasses any of these in importance or prevalence as a literary influence, but rather joins them as a previously neglected point of interest in Romantic critical studies. Critics who argue that Milton or Wordsworth had the greatest bearing on Hunt's or Keats's poetic development or literary politics I do not wish to contest in terms of accuracy; such literary figures, however important they may be to the Cockney School, do not compete with or jostle against Dante's voice within this network of influence. The dense web of literary predecessors that inform poems such as *Rimini* does not undermine the significance of Dante; on the contrary, adding voices to this ever-expanding and closely interlocking web can only enhance our understanding of the intertextuality that forms the backdrop of Romanticism, and even yield fresh readings of authors such as Milton or Wordsworth through the Cockney School, just as I have demonstrated here with Dante.

That said, this previously underacknowledged perspective of Dante serves as a commentary on the flexibility of the *Divine Comedy* and its notorious ability to endlessly accommodate new readings of itself, rather than an intent to renegotiate its identity and superimpose a Romantic reading onto our understanding of the text as a whole. Simply put, why does this new understanding of an aesthetically “proto-Romantic Dante” serve as a

reinterpretation of the Romantics' Dante rather than of Dante himself? The answer to this question lies in how we perceive Dante's work in the context of Romanticism—that, having examined the *Comedy* in the context of *Rimini* and “A Dream After Reading,” our understanding of Dante shifts and adjusts to include the Cockney School's debate regarding this political and aesthetic interplay—a debate in part temporally situated within the Romantic period, and yet also endlessly applicable to both past and future texts that may be placed in dialogue with it. It is in this sense and in this sense only that we may call Dante proto-Romantic—not by any structural component inherent in the text, but by virtue of our examination of it in the context of Romantic texts that add additional dimensions to the *Comedy*, another iteration of Dante rather than a renegotiation of a single and static text. The politics of reading in Keats and Hunt, therefore, placed in dialogue with Dante's work, has a reciprocal influential effect. It is only through our examination of Dante that we arrive at our conceptualization of the aesthetic debate within the Cockney School, and it is only through the work of figures such as Keats and Hunt that we may discover this same undercurrent throughout the *Divine Comedy* and, in doing so, trace his influence throughout the British literary canon, from the Romantic era to the present.

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