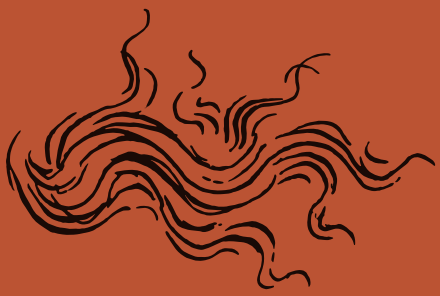
CULTURE AND POLITICS

Liberties



The moon snail is almost out of sight.
Its gray, wrinkled body passes over the sand in that
same straight line
toward the end of the continental shelf
and the drop-off. I watch for others, visitors,
a gleam of something turning away
in the blue.

It is not childhood, exactly.
A shoe drifts by.

There are my table and chair
too small to sit at. They say: *all along*
you have not seen even one thing clearly.

ANDREW BUTTERFIELD

Exile to Exile

We live in a state of constant strife; the truths we relied on no longer seem certain; we are unsettled, shaken, adrift. Even those of us lucky enough to retain our health, homes, families, and jobs feel exiled from the lives we once knew. The bonds of friendship and community that secured us have loosened, and we are cut off in time as well: the past is more remote, the future unimaginable. In crisis, we face a world of danger: war, plague, apocalypse, discord, violence.

How odd that the work of literature which most fully describes our state, our emergency, was not written recently, but over seven hundred years ago. The evils and the fears that

troubled Dante in his *Divine Comedy* are uncannily like the ones that threaten us; his world is our world, so much so that the monsters of cruelty and lust that fill his pages are instantly recognizable — one only need change the names to see them as the figures of today's miserable news.

The ever-present relevance of the *The Divine Comedy* has long been noted. Almost one hundred years ago, Osip Mandelstam, who experienced some of modernity's worst darkness, observed that "it is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future...His contemporaneity is continuous, incalculable and inexhaustible." This immediacy is no accident. Although he was writing in the early fourteenth century, the poet composed his poem to speak to us. All serious artists hope their work will endure, but Dante, as almost no writer before him, sought to address the future, not just the readers of his day. We know this because he says so. At the end of the *Paradiso*, he states that the *Divine Comedy* is for *la futura gente*, the people of the future.

The poem is a compendium, an encyclopedia, a summa, and yet there is one subject above all that gives it urgency, and that is exile. Displacement and the longing for return have inspired so much literature, beginning with the Hebrew Bible and the *Odyssey*. But perhaps no writer is more deeply associated with the theme than Dante. He was cast out from Florence, his birthplace, in 1302, after having served for two years as a high city official, a victim of the interminable political violence of the city. He was stripped of all his property; broken off from his family; threatened with death by fire at the stake if he ever dared to come back. He never did, wandering poor and dishonored through Italy until his death in 1321. With a single

exception, all his great works were written in exile; it was exile that made him a master artist, philosopher, and prophet. It was exile, and the causes of exile, that he needed to explain to himself and to warn us about.

Before his banishment he was a lyric poet, one of the pioneers of the literary movement known as the *dolce stil nuovo* — the sweet new style — who wrote love poetry of a philosophical cast. He composed his verses for the admiration of a tiny elite of other poets, a group of a few dozen men whom the great Dante scholar Erich Auerbach compared to a "secret brotherhood." His chief work of these years is the *Vita Nuova*, an autobiographical fantasy in poetry and prose about his love for the young Beatrice Portinari, her early death, and his spiritual reaction. (She was to become the avatar of salvation in *The Divine Comedy*, and thereby the most famous idealized woman in Western literature.) Although a work of great inventiveness, with passages of aching poignancy, other sections are plainly insincere, and Dante's language can often be vague and periphrastic. No one is sure what some of it means. Auerbach concluded that parts are "baffling... puzzling...obscure." Dante himself found much of his early poetry dissatisfying, and even called it *faticosa*, laborious.

How utterly different is *The Divine Comedy*. Written in a mode of Italian of Dante's own invention — the *volgare illustre*, or elevated vernacular — and addressing the broadest possible audience, the poetry is characterized above all by its vividness, lucidity, and dramatic appeal. No longer does he want to dazzle a few friends with his brilliance and his erudite allusiveness. Now he wishes to inspire and explain and guide and admonish. He throws away the ambiguities that he once adored and turns instead to "clear words and precise language" — to borrow the terms Dante uses in the *Paradiso* (the third of the three

"canticles" that comprise the work) to praise the speech of Cacciaguida, his ancestor and hero. The new goal is *visibile parlare* — visible speech, presented in tercets of eleven-syllable lines that makes the reader picture and see and hear the events and the figures that the poet describes in gripping detail.

The leap of imagination that this devising entailed would not have been possible without the experiences gained in exile. One of the wanderer's discoveries, for example, was the diversity of Italian as spoken throughout the peninsula — its richness, range, and dignity. This gave him the conviction that Italian could be a literary language of the highest ambition, worthy of the most serious subjects, a distinction previously reserved only for Latin. Another was his recognition that language, literature, and indeed all of civilization are part of an historical process, and thus evolve continually and ineluctably. We, who have been born and bred on historicism, may take for granted the idea of cultural change, but it was Dante, comparing the dialects in Italy and the Romance languages in Europe, who first realized that it did so. Words mutate; norms shift; poetry can grow, rather than repeat the forms of the past.

At the same time, it was only in banishment that Dante came to know Latin literature well. At the end of the Middle Ages, books were still immensely expensive and incredibly rare, and the libraries of Florence were poorly stocked. To be sure, Dante knew Latin before his expulsion, but as has been brilliantly demonstrated by Ulrich Leo, it was only after he was cast out that Dante "read again, or in part for the first time, classical Latin poetry and prose." It was in exile that he started to identify with another wanderer and founder of Italian civilization — with Aeneas; in exile that he learned to know deeply the *Aeneid*, whose Book Six, with its account of a descent into Hades, was fundamental for his creation of the *Inferno*. It

was in exile that he came to see Virgil as the greatest of Latin poets, *il mio maestro e 'l mio autore*, from whom Dante learned *lo bello stile che m'ha fatto onore* — "the beautiful style that brought me honor." This transformative encounter perhaps took place in Verona in 1303, or in Bologna a year or two later: both cities had libraries of classical texts far richer than those in Florence.

The new clarity of Dante's poetic language was stimulated not only by high-minded considerations. It was also sparked by the rage that he felt for the injustice of his punishment. We are accustomed to think of *The Divine Comedy* as a poem of love, and of course it is: the love of God, the love of Beatrice, the love of "the love that moves the sun and the other stars." But it is important to acknowledge that it is also a poem of hate. His wrath never left him. Such was its ferocity that even when he comes to the redemptive climax of the poem and describes the upper reaches of Paradise, where all is joy and harmony, light and laughter, he cannot resist pouring venom on Pope Boniface VIII, whom he held ultimately responsible for his ill fate. Until this point in *The Divine Comedy*, Dante had always portrayed Beatrice as an emblem of wisdom, grace, and love; and yet, quite shockingly, Dante makes her last words in the poem, spoken from the Empyrean, castigate the pope and pray for him to rot in Hell. His rage contaminates even her supreme purity.

Dante's lust for revenge is most palpable in the *Inferno*. Here we see him kick one sinner in the head, and pull another's hair, and give thanks to God for the dismemberment of a man whose family had taken Dante's house after his exile. Throughout the canticle, it is Dante's seething and uncontrollable

anger that powers the vividness of description. Consider, for example, the first punishment he recounts in the poem:

> These wretches who never were alive,
> were naked and beset
> by stinging flies and wasps
>
> That made their faces stream with blood,
> which, mingled with their tears,
> was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms.
>
> *Translated by Robert and Jean Hollander*

The outcast poet stings with those flies and wasps; he cheers for those loathsome worms. With insatiable avidity, in canto after canto, he piles up images of muck, filth, and fire; devils cut, gash, strike, jab, and smite the malefactors; the air is greasy, dark, and grim; the shrieks of the damned are piercing and hopeless; blood and bones and guts and shit are everywhere.

Crafting these scenes of punitive horror gave his language an edge and bite, a richness and directness, all without precedent in European literature. Only the darkest moments in classical poetry can rival Dante's black passages for intensity. But really no one ever before had lavished so much talent on detailed and sadistic depictions of utter gruesomeness, and at such length. For Dante ancient literature was fundamentally tragic, a poetry of death and madness. Conquering this mode made him the rival of the masters of the past. This is perhaps most evident in Canto 25 in the *Inferno*, where amid descriptions of monstrous rape and cruel deformation, Dante triumphantly proclaims, "Silence Lucan … Silence . . . Ovid."

Here he asserts that he has achieved the greatness and the stature that was implicitly promised him when he met these poets, and Homer and Horace, in Limbo, at the outset of his journey through Hell.

Dante's wrath in exile was not only an engine of creativity. It was also part of the great moral crisis whose reckoning and resolution lies at the heart of the poem. Dante knew that just retribution belongs to God, not to mortals. He portrays Hell full of "furious shadows" whose unquenchable ire contributes to their agony; and he repeatedly depicts the damned biting and beating themselves in a bestial frenzy. He knew that to allow anger to take hold of his life was a form of mortal peril. Indeed, many scholars believe that Dante may have been on the verge of insanity and contemplated suicide in the early years of his banishment. The challenge for Dante was how to exit the dark wood in which he found himself in the beginning of the poem, to master havoc and despair.

His few surviving letters show that he remained bitter and wounded to the end of his days. "We have long wept by the waters of Confusion" like "exiles in Babylon," he wrote in an epistle in 1311, echoing the famous Psalm. And yet *The Divine Comedy* is finally a manual of deliverance, an incitement to hope and action. It makes its way to paradise. The book itself is the product of the perseverance that it preaches. It took Dante about fifteen years to complete, working at the pace of about three lines — one tercet — a day. The longer his banishment went on, the more ardently he poured all his powers into the book, which he completed shortly before his death in 1321. The work is full of exhortations to himself: to start, to continue,

to persist to the end. "I leave behind bitterness and go for the sweet fruit," he writes in the *Inferno*. "Nothing hinders the ascent except the darkness of night which binds the will with helplessness," he reminds himself in the *Purgatorio*. He must go on because he "who robs himself of the world...and wastes his abilities, lamenting when he should rejoice," sins against God.

The poem was Dante's path to recognition and redemption. In the wilderness of exile, his understanding of exile deepened, his vision expanded, and he became the author of perhaps the most visionary work in Western literature. The book encompasses not only the details of his own suffering but also the reasons for the predation, fraud, and violence that humans have inflicted upon one another everywhere. All the theology in the work notwithstanding, he is a close and unillusioned student of human life. And as his conception of the theme expanded, so did the audience that Dante imagined for his work: not just other cultured elites or fellow Florentine citizens, but potentially all readers of his time and into the future.

While always grieving for his homelessness and dreaming of his return to Florence, he began to see that exile gave him an unprecedented perspective on human affairs, an intellectual advantage. In a world where everyone's identity was defined by their membership in groups — especially the family, the parish, the city, and the political party — Guelf or Ghibelline, the two alliances that poisonously divided all of Italy and much of northern Europe too — Dante came to view himself as a party of one, and to believe that this status was a badge of honor rather than blame. The loss of belonging stripped him of community, but in his isolation gave him new hope for understanding.

Exile became a voyage of discovery, for all its peril and humiliation. At times he compared his genius, his poem, and his fate to a ship on a sea. Like Ulysses, with whom he so strongly identified, he was bound "to gain experience of the world and learn man's vices, and his worth," for man was "not made to live like brutes or beasts, but to pursue virtue and knowledge." This pilgrimage carried him from the dark wood, where all seemed lost and nothing could be seen, to ever greater distances, whose vantage point made all clear — first the extremities of Hell and then the mountain of Purgatory and finally the heights of heaven, from which he looks down and sees all of earth. From this vista he marvels not only at the sublimity of his apotheosis, but also at man's unending propensity for violence, comparing the world to *l'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci*, "the threshing floor that makes us so ferocious." Even in heaven he remains troubled by earth.

Searching for the cause of this malevolence, he not only looked at mankind from above, he also turned inward. "If the world around you goes astray, in you is the cause and in you let it be sought," he instructs in the *Purgatorio*. One source of the power of the book is his capacity to empathize with the sinners whom he describes in all their misguided passion and intensity. The author of the *Inferno* is a connoisseur of human failings. The vividly portrayed characters are fragments of himself, intended to mirror his own passions and weaknesses, his own temptations to moral error. Dante lusts like Francesca and Paolo, and feels with them the seductions of literature; he thrills with partisan hatred like Farinata; he considers suicide like Piero della Vigna; he longs for vengeance like Ugolino; he abandons all for the pursuit of knowledge like Ulysses. Dante was certain of his own genius and his supreme stature as a poet, but he was also sure that he was an Everyman, who shared in the common flaws of humanity, as do all his readers.

In exile, Dante came to see the fallen nature of man after

exile from the Garden as the unifying force of human history. It is the disorder of human desires that propels the unfolding of events and ties them all together, so that Florence of his day resembled Babylon and Troy and Thebes of the past, each brought to ruin by unbridled passions for power and gold. Like Augustine, Dante believed it was not sexual lust but the lust for dominance — what Augustine called the *libido dominandi* — that drove history. For Dante, the world is "blind," a "bloody heap," a "desert devoid of virtue," a "nest of Leda," whose offspring in their lordly arrogance and mindless cupidity doom everyone around them to destruction. The uncontrolled appetite of humans began at the very beginning: according to Dante, Adam and Eve tasted of the fruit and were expelled from Eden only six hours after their creation.

It is a tragic view of life, and yet Dante entitled his poem a *Comedy*. (The name we know it by, *The Divine Comedy*, is a later convention.) He did so because, despite his belief in man's propensity for sin, he also believed that by nature humankind is virtuous, noble, and dignified, and supposed to live a life of happiness and fulfillment here on earth, not just in heaven. The poem is the story of the recovery and the unfolding of this destiny — at least for one exemplary pilgrim, Dante. He spells out his idea of human goodness most succinctly in the two philosophical treatises that he worked on during exile. In the *Convivio*, or *Banquet*, he declares that "there is no greatness greater for human beings than virtuous activity, which is our intrinsic good," and that "the fruits most properly ours are the moral virtues, since they are completely within our power." In the *Monarchia*, or *Monarchy*, he writes that "ineffable providence" has set before us the goal of "happiness in this life, which consists in the exercise of our proper virtues." In these opinions he was deeply influenced by Aristotle, whom he refers to as "the master of our life" in the *Convivio*. Dante had likely studied the *Nichomachean Ethics* under the guidance of a student of Thomas Aquinas at the Dominican convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence in the 1290s.

So the human darkness that Dante chillingly portrayed reaches its limits. Fundamental to his analysis of human nature was his focus on love, and its expression as desire and appetite. "Desire is spiritual motion," he said, the force that drives our action toward evil or good. It is what defines and gives shape to an individual's character and destiny. You are bound or you are liberated by what you love. The major distinction between the figures of the *Inferno* and those of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, between the sinners and the saints, is what they desire.

The figures in the *Inferno* suffer from insatiable appetite. They are ruled by their mouths, an image that Dante emphasizes repeatedly, from the mouth of Francesca trembling with passion for Paolo, to the mouth of Ugolino, stained with the blood of Ruggiero whose brains he has eaten in revenge, to the mouths of Satan at the very pit of Hell, stuffed with the three great traitors Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. The she-wolf of avarice who blocks Dante's way in Canto I sets the tone for the entire canticle:

> Her nature is so vicious and malign
> her greedy appetite is never sated—
> after she feeds she is hungrier than ever.

Translated by Robert and Jean Hollander

Avarice by nature always seeks an end — more, more, more — that can never be reached, thus unleashing a kind of frantic madness in those who experience it. According to Dante, Pride and Envy also share in this bottomless avidity. They are the three ruling vices of life on earth; they typify rulers, popes, warriors, and merchants—the effective lords of the world — and determine the unjust character of their governance and domination.

Dante believed that these vices were essentially anti-social, spurred by hatred, rather than love, for one's neighbor. They necessitated *ingiuria*, an Italian term whose meaning combines both injustice and harm to others. To highlight this idea as central in the poem's ethical philosophy, he composed this sentence for the exact midpoint of the entire *Divine Comedy*: "All these three forms of love cause weeping down below." Humans, at least after the Fall, are ensnared and distorted by these appetites. The war and the greed and the bad government that plentifully characterized his own era were thus bound to repeat forever.

The blessed of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* are likewise spurred by desire, but theirs is a need for God, and for the Common Good. It is a vision of love as Agape rather than Eros. On earth humans are locked in a zero-sum game, fighting over spoils than can never be divided equitably. In heaven, by contrast, what they seek and what they share is love, each of the blessed radiating benevolence to others, like an undiminishing light reflected among an infinity of mirrors. While continuously yearning for God, the truest object of love, this is a desire that is also continuously fulfilled. It is the zeal of the saints, and it pulls Dante upward with ever greater force as he ascends to paradise. And unlike the misplaced appetites of the fallen, it ends in the just and proper form of man. As

he explains in the *Convivio*, "The supreme desire of each thing, the primal one given by its nature, is to return to its principle. And since God is the principle of our souls and made them like himself...the soul desires more than anything else to return to him." Here exile is given a cosmic metaphor and becomes metaphysical. The greatest banishment is the banishment from God, and therefore from oneself. And rather than the mouth of the *Inferno*, here the essential human organ of love and desire is the eye, the recipient of heavenly light. "Beatitude itself is based upon the act of seeing," Dante affirms, almost as if from experience.

Dante's tale is one of optimism, too, because he believed man to be free to regulate his behavior and affect his destiny. In the *Paradiso*, he calls free will the "greatest gift" of God to man. It is this gift, the capacity to choose and to act, that emancipates us from the inevitabilities of fate and makes life into a journey, although a perilous one. "In the middle of the journey of our life": those are the famous opening words of the work. Auerbach has beautifully described the moral condition envisioned by Dante in *The Divine Comedy:* "God is at rest; His Creation moves along eternally determined paths, while man alone must seek his decision in uncertainty... Man alone, but man in every case regardless of his earthly situation, is and must be a dramatic hero." Even though he had been selected by God for his visionary voyage through hell and heaven, an honor among the living previously given only to Paul, and despite the traveler's aid granted to him by Virgil and Beatrice, Dante's trajectory is still beset with difficulty; he still must struggle to understand, to persevere, to act correctly, to be worthy of the mission with which God has tasked him.

In conceiving and writing *The Divine Comedy*, the poet reimagined his exile as a pilgrimage. No longer does he want

primarily to return to Florence, the city on the Arno. Now he seeks to return to Jerusalem, the city of God in heaven. To do so, he must transform himself. He must learn to control his anger, and act with right measure in his pursuit of knowledge, and temper his lust for fame, and constrain his pride. Only by doing so will be able to "return in beauty" like "new plants renewed with new-sprung leaves pure and prepared." And as a man remade, he will also return as a new kind of poet, one with a new language resurrected from the ashes of the tragic and the erotic, and reformed in the mode of what he exquisitely calls the *cantar di là*, the song of the beyond. Dante's voyage is one of hope, announced with nearly prophetic fervor in the face of disorder and destruction.

We tend to picture philosophers and writers in the setting of the cloister and the café, the library and the lecture room, but Dante saw them — and himself — as figures in the world, and he knew that like everyone else in the world, they are routinely tossed aside by the vicissitudes of power in war and politics, and often they end up on the margins of society, in exile or worse. Consider the fates of those whom Dante admired most: Socrates, executed; Plato, enslaved; Aristotle, exiled; Cicero, murdered; Seneca, exiled and later forced into suicide; Ovid, exiled; Augustine, dying in a city besieged by Vandals; Boethius, imprisoned, tortured, killed. The parade of woe continued into Dante's own time; indeed, almost all his mentors and friends among the poets of the *dolce stil novo* spent time in banishment. The greatest philosopher and theologian of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, had been assassinated (or so Dante believed). And as a member of the Florentine government council, Dante even participated in the decision to cast out a fellow poet, the remarkable Guido Cavalcanti. They suffer so, because everyone does.

His own experience did not offer Dante much ground for a worldview of hope, and so he had to locate it elsewhere. And yet he stubbornly counseled that, all the evils notwithstanding, we act with determination and purpose. Early in his exile, he observed that "truly I have been a boat without sail or rudder, carried to various ports and inlets and shores by the dry wind that painful poverty blows." But about five years later, having surveyed and described in the *Inferno* the damage that humankind perpetrates, he set out to find and show a better way in the *Purgatorio*. For the first line of this canticle, he wrote: "To course in better waters, raise the sails."

In our journey of recent years, we have seen some of the best and the worst of humankind. Like the wayfarer in *The Divine Comedy,* we have faced gruesome death, raged against despair, witnessed corruption, disorder and anarchy. We have asked what it means, and why we must suffer so. In my own experience of this symbolic exile, cut off from friends and from accustomed activity, I began reading Dante. He speaks to our troubles because he reminds us that the folly, vice, and depredation of humans will always be with us. We are always waking to find ourselves in the middle of the dark forest. Yet he leaves us believing that, armed with the recognition of both our vices and our virtues, we can find a better nature within our imperfect selves. If we can raise our sails, we can catch a breath of hopeful wind; and on that wind we can navigate life toward a better end, in the pursuit of knowledge and the reverence of love.

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There are subjects about which one cannot be clear without fraud. Every emotion and condition has its reverse side, and ambiguity can stand for a profound frankness, an acknowledgement of the essential ambivalence of truth and experience, of life itself.

ROGER SHATTUCK

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