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DANTE'S POLITICAL LIFE

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The approach of the seven-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death is a propitious time to recall the events that drove him from his native Florence and marked his life in various Italian cities before he found his final refuge in Ravenna, where he died and was buried in 1321. Drawing on early chronicles and biographies, modern historical research and biographical criticism, and the poet's own writings, I construct this narrative of "Dante's Political Life" for the milestone commemoration of his death. The poet's politically-motivated exile, this biographical essay shows, was destined to become one of the world's most fortunate misfortunes.

Keywords: Dante, Exile, Florence, Biography

The proliferation of biographical and historical scholarship on Dante in recent years, after a relative paucity of such work through much of the twentieth century, prompted a welcome cluster of reflections on this critical genre in a recent volume of *Dante Studies*. Across various responses to the topic emerged the takeaway that serious attention to the poet's life and times is a positive development in the field, one that would, however, benefit from deeper and more explicit consideration of the methodologies and conceptual frameworks employed. On this question, Elisa Brillì usefully situated, at one end of the spectrum, Giorgio Inglese's bare-boned biographical account, relying only on facts and plausible determinations derived from documentary and literary evidence, and, at the other end, Marco Santagata's novelistic attempt to fill in gaps and address unanswered questions by entertaining possible but unsubstantiated explanations. David Wallace, in his contribution to the forum, observed that a number of recent "lives" of the poet—particularly those aimed at non-academic readers—reduce and domesticate Dante for easy consumption, forgetting that "the poetry *is* the life in the ways that matter most."¹

¹ Elisa Brillì, "Dante's Biographies and Historical Studies: An Overture," *Dante Studies* 136 (2018): 133-42, at 134; David Wallace, "Lives of Dante: Why Now?," *Dante Studies* 136 (2018): 213-22, at 222; Giorgio Inglese, *Vita di Dante: Una biografia*

Lessons learned from these and other works of biographical and historical Dante criticism substantially informed the methodology of my recent book on the poet's physical and cultural afterlife.² Although that work focused on events in the life of Dante's remains over the past seven centuries—for the most part, a more richly documented tradition—I nonetheless often faced the biographer's and historian's questions about the reliability of sources and the distinction between factual, plausible, and merely possible claims. I also sought, when appropriate, to illuminate Dante's graveyard history with my readings of his textual corpus, and vice versa. I follow a similar approach in this essay commemorating the 700th anniversary of the poet's death in Ravenna, a propitious time to revisit the political events that led to his banishment from Florence and shaped his life in exile. While my reconstruction of Dante's political life seeks to meet the threshold of plausibility based on evidence from the poet's texts and corroborating documentary sources, I agree with Brillì that it behooves Dante specialists and other researchers “to rethink our scholarly writing and define new forms to disseminate our findings without renouncing rigorous methods of inquiry.” To that end, I have adopted a historical narrative mode for this essay as the best way to show how Dante's politically-motivated exile was destined to become one of the most fortunate misfortunes the world has known.³

possibile (Rome: Carocci, 2015), and “Una biografia impossibile,” *Dante Studies* 136 (2018): 161–66; Marco Santagata, *Dante: The Story of His Life* [*Dante: Il romanzo della sua vita*], trans. Richard Dixon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), and Preface to Giuseppe Indizio, *Problemi di biografia dantesca* (Ravenna: Longo, 2013), 5–7. Nassime Chida charts specific differences between the expansive approach of Umberto Carpi, a major influence on Santagata, and the more restrictive methodology of Inglese (“Dante's Life (1302–1310): Showing Divergences between Carpi and Inglese,” *Digital Dante* [New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018], <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/history/claims-chida/>).

² *Dante's Bones: How a Poet Invented Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

³ Brillì, “Dante's Biographies,” 142. Early biographies and chronicles shaping my narration of political events from Dante's life include Giovanni Boccaccio, *Trattatello in laude di Dante* [Life of Dante], first redaction, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci, in *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, 10 vols. (Milan: Mondadori, 1964–1983), vol. 3, 437–96; Dino Compagni, *Cronica*, ed. Davide Cappelletti (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medioevo, 2000), trans. Daniel E. Bornstein, *Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986); Giovanni Villani, *Nuova cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Porta, 3 vols., 2nd ed. (Parma: Fondazione Pietro Bembo, 2007), 10.136, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, rev. William Chamberlain (Richmond, UK: Oneworld Classics, 2009), 101–2; Filippo Villani, *De origine civitatis Florentiae et de eiusdem famosis civibus*, ed. Giuliano Tanturli (Padua: Antenore, 1997), 22.58–69, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, rev. William Chamberlain

Dante, whose parents died before he turned eighteen, lived off the modest income provided by properties in the Florentine countryside. While he could boast of having one or more noble ancestors in the family tree, his father's social and financial standing, though respectable, was far below the top echelon of Florentine society. Alighiero II had achieved modest success in unspecified business dealings, some of which probably involved money lending. Thanks to political reforms of the early 1290s, Florentine men of Dante's station were eligible to participate in public life by serving on councils and in the priorate, the city's highest governing body. A prerequisite for such service was membership in one of Florence's guilds or professional associations. Records show that Dante enrolled in the guild of physicians and apothecaries on July 6, 1295, a choice dictated not by employment but by intellectual affinities.

Over the next five years he represented his home *sestiere* or *sesto* (Florence being divided into six districts) on a variety of important committees and councils. In December of 1295 he sat on the Council of the Wise (*savi*) charged with determining procedures for the election of priors. In 1295–1296 he served a six-month term on the Council of the Captain of the People, a consultative body whose purview ranged from ordinary administrative affairs to major policy decisions. Dante also participated in the financial management of Florence through his membership in the Council of One Hundred in May–September 1296. Meeting minutes have not survived for most of the final two years of the thirteenth century,

(Richmond, UK: Oneworld Classics, 2009), 103–4; Leonardo Bruni, *Vita di Dante*, in *Opere letterarie e politiche*, ed. Paolo Viti (Turin: UTET, 1996), 539–52, trans. Philip H. Wicksteed, rev. William Chamberlain (Richmond, UK: Oneworld Classics, 2009), 87–99, and *History of the Florentine People*, ed. and trans. James Hankins, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Giannozzo Manetti, “Life of Dante,” in *Biographical Writings*, ed. and trans. Stefano U. Baldassarri and Rolf Bagemihl (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 8–61. I also draw on biographical and historical material in Michele Barbi, *Life of Dante*, trans. and ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1954); Giorgio Petrocchi, *Vita di Dante*, 2nd ed. (Bari: Laterza, 1984); Stephen Bemrose, *A New Life of Dante* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2000); Giuseppe Mazzotta, “Life of Dante,” *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1–13; Giorgio Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie di Dante Alighieri: La vita politica del più grande fiorentino di tutti i tempi* (Florence: Firenze Libri, 2003); Morris L. Ghezzi, ed., *Il processo di Dante celebrato il 16 aprile 1966 nella Basilica di S. Francesco in Arezzo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2011); Lino Pertile, “Life,” in *Dante in Context*, ed. Zygmunt Barański and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 461–74; Santagata, *Dante*; and Inglese, *Vita di Dante*.

but Dante's political star continued to rise in this period. By 1300 his peers valued him highly enough to dispatch him to San Gimignano, hoping that he would convince city officials to increase their troop contribution and join a conference of Tuscan Guelphs.

Guelphs and Ghibellines—names derived from rival royal houses in Germany (*Welf*, *Waiblingen*)—were the political sides at war with one another in thirteenth-century Italy. They were distinguished, roughly, by their allegiance to the pope (Guelphs) or the emperor (Ghibellines). Dante draws on the history of their rivalry in the *Commedia* to create some of his most memorable episodes and characters. These include the origin of Florentine factional violence in 1215 with the murder of Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti as instigated by Mosca de' Lamberti, the Ghibelline massacre of Guelph forces at Montaperti in 1260 owing to the leadership of Farinata degli Uberti and the betrayal of Bocca degli Abati, the defeat of Manfred (son of Emperor Frederick II) at Benevento in 1266, and the Guelph rout of the Ghibellines at Campaldino in 1289. Fighting there with the Florentine cavalry, Dante perhaps encountered or came to hear of Buonconte da Montefeltro, the Ghibelline soldier whose corpse was never found.⁴ This decisive victory secured the dominance of Florence and its Guelph allies in Tuscany.

The purpose of the Guelph conference in 1300 goes to the heart of the political drama that changed Dante's life forever. "All roads lead to Rome" proved to have more than geographic and symbolic meaning for Dante. He firmly believed that the Eternal City was the divinely ordained center of power, both political and religious. Dante says at the beginning of his journey through the afterlife that Virgil's hero, Aeneas, fathered Rome as the future capital of an empire and "the sacred precinct where successors of Great Peter have their throne" ("lo loco santo / u' siede il successor del maggior Piero" [*Inf.* 2.23-24]).⁵ The imperial piece of this equation was missing during the period of Dante's political ascendancy, in large measure because Pope Boniface VIII claimed secular as well as spiritual supremacy in the world. In 1300 Boniface sought to expand papal and familial interests by waging a campaign to annex

⁴ Mosca is punished as a sower of discord in the eighth circle of Hell (*Inf.* 28.103-11), Farinata as a heretic in circle six (*Inf.* 10.22-121), and Bocca as a political traitor in circle nine (*Inf.* 32.73-123). Dante encounters Manfred and Buonconte in the Ante-Purgatory (*Purg.* 3.103-45, *Purg.* 5.85-129). Dante's military service is the subject of my article, "Dante at Arms," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 28, no. 4 (2016): 86-89.

⁵ I cite *La Divina Commedia*, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), translated by Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000-2007).

Tuscan lands belonging to Countess Margherita Aldobrandeschi. To conquer this territory, he needed to mobilize troops from friendly cities in the region, meaning those under Guelph control.

Dante's mission to San Gimignano was a prime example of how Florence tried to stay on Boniface's good side while protecting itself against his aggression. Dante urged San Gimignano to double its contribution of soldiers in support of the pope's Tuscan campaign; although he failed in this mission, city leaders agreed to the request after hearing it directly from an archbishop representing the pope. At the same time, Dante asked San Gimignano to send magistrates to the conference of Tuscan Guelphs "to renew their alliance and to select their commander in chief." In the absence of imperial authority, the purpose of this conference was to defend Guelph independence against the political schemes of a pope then seeking "to subject the whole of Tuscany to the rule of the Church."⁶ Boniface, like some popes before him and others to come, sought to enrich his family through the power of his office. One of his predecessors is Dante's showpiece for this form of ecclesiastical abuse: Pope Nicholas III had attempted to secure the province of Romagna for his nephew or *nipote*, the Italian word that gives a name to nepotism. Nicholas, whose plan was foiled only by his death in 1280, paid the penalty for his sins in a very low circle of Dante's Hell. The poet evened the score with Boniface in the *Commedia* by having Nicholas, who has the power (like all souls) to see the future, foretell the damnation of Boniface, himself a "ferocious nepotist."⁷

Dante's embassy to San Gimignano took place on May 7, 1300. By then the Florentine Guelphs had split into rival factions, each side led by a military hero from the victory at Campaldino in 1289. The nobleman Corso Donati, whose derring-do turned the course of the battle in the Guelphs' favor, headed the group closely aligned with old, aristocratic Florence. The opposing party, more in tune with the city's recent political reforms and economic expansion, supported interests of the Cerchi, a wealthy banking family. Vieri de' Cerchi, the *paterfamilias*, distinguished himself at Campaldino by putting himself in the first rank of the charging cavalry—the brave *feditori*, or "strikers," which also included Dante—despite being lame in one leg. Most impressively, he used

⁶ Barbi, *Life of Dante*, 12; Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 33.

⁷ Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence from the Founding of the City through the Renaissance* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1961), 167. Pope Nicholas III is buried upside down among the simonists—"I filled my purse as now I fill this hole" ("che sù l'avere e qui me misi in borsa" [*Inf.* 19.72]), he laments to Dante in the third *bolgia* of circle eight.

his authority as captain of his home district to select his son and grandsons as frontline horsemen as well, a decision that drew praise for Vieri and shamed other privileged Florentines into joining him and his progeny in the perilous charge. Showing “great prowess,” Vieri acquitted himself well in battle, “as did his son the knight by his side,” and so he, like Corso Donati, naturally assumed a leadership position in the Florentine commune.⁸

Dante’s social standing and political inclinations put him squarely in the Cerchi camp, better known as the White Guelphs, in opposition to Corso Donati’s Black Guelphs—the colors came to designate the enemy factions in 1301, when the terms were imported from Pistoia. It was as a White Guelph, a supporter of the Cerchi clan, that Dante rose to the highest level of Florentine governance and was elected to the Council of Priors for a two-month term beginning on June 15, 1300. Exercising consultative, deliberative, and executive functions, Florence’s priors bore the greatest communal responsibility. Dante’s political success came at the most inopportune time. “All my woes and all my misfortunes,” he wrote in a letter (now lost), “had their cause and origin in my ill-omened election to the priorate.”⁹

The priors who immediately preceded and followed Dante only exacerbated the troubles born of his term in office. Florentine leaders learned in the spring of 1300 that three citizens, at the instigation of Boniface, were conspiring from Rome to bring down the White Guelph government. The men were sentenced on April 18 to pay a large fine or to have their tongues cut out, a conviction so upsetting to the pope that within a week he ordered his Florentine bishop to demand its repeal. Far from complying, the government stood firm and poked a finger in the pontiff’s eye by choosing one of the plot’s discoverers—Lapo Saltarelli—as prior for April 15 to June 14.¹⁰ When Dante and his fellow priors began their two-month term on June 15, they had no choice but to uphold the sentence against the conspirators, a decision that only further enraged Boniface.

Another punitive sentence, this one initiated during the poet’s priorate, had even more dire consequences. On June 23, 1300, a week into Dante’s term, a group of *magnati*—powerful

⁸ Villani, *Nuova cronica* 8.131; Compagni, *Cronica* 1.10: “Molto bene provò messer Vieri de’ Cerchi con uno suo figliolo cavaliere alla costa di sé.”

⁹ The phrase from the lost letter is translated from Latin and cited by Bruni, *Vita di Dante*, 542: “Tutti e mali et tutti gl’inconvenienti miei dalli infausti comitii del mio priorato ebbono cagione et principio.”

¹⁰ Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 33–34.

aristocrats—from the Donati or Black Guelph faction attacked leaders of the Florentine guilds during their procession on the eve of the feast of John the Baptist, the city's patron saint. The priors, after consulting with an assembly of *savi* or “wise” citizens, decided to make a statement by expelling leaders of the rival factions. Eight Black Guelphs (including Corso Donati) with their families and associates were sent southeast to Castel della Pieve (Città della Pieve) in the territory of Perugia, while seven White Guelphs and their entourages were exiled to Sarzana, a marshy area near the northwestern Tuscan coast. Guido Cavalcanti, a fellow poet whom Dante called “first among my friends,” was among the banished White Guelphs.¹¹

The priors installed on August 16, 1300, committed a grave political error by recalling their White Guelph comrades from exile while refusing to allow the Black Guelph contingent to return to Florence. No longer a prior himself, Dante was nevertheless blamed by political enemies for this biased decision. He was an easy target as a White Guelph partisan and the close friend of Guido Cavalcanti, who contracted malaria in the unhealthy marshland. Even if it were an act of compassion, the decision to recall only the White Guelphs encouraged skeptics to see it as a political favor to Guido owing to his friendship with Dante. To be fair, Dante's defense did nothing to disabuse malicious tongues of their suspicions. Rather than playing down Guido's role, he used his friend's illness—which proved fatal—as the reason for the recall of the White Guelphs from Sarzana.¹² With Guido's death, Dante had to live with the guilt of having banished his dear friend to a place where he contracted the illness that took his life. At the same time, he incurred the wrath of his political enemies when the next Council of Priors used Guido's illness as a pretext for recalling the White Guelphs—but not the Black Guelphs—from the exile decreed during Dante's priorate. This period in high office was indeed the source of the poet's “woes” and “misfortunes.”

The final major decision of Dante and his fellow priors was to seek an alliance with Bologna. This military-diplomatic agreement, signed on August 25, 1300, only ten days after Dante's term had ended, was another attempt by Florentine leaders to bolster their defenses against Pope Boniface VIII's plan for complete control—political as well as religious—over Tuscany. The alliance with Bologna and the recall of only the White Guelphs predictably

¹¹ *VN* 3.14: “primo de li miei amici.” I cite *Vita nuova*, ed. and trans. Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

¹² Brunetti, *History* 4.57–58; *Vita di Dante*, 544–45.

angered Boniface and his cardinal legate in Tuscany and Romagna, Matteo d'Acquasparta, whom the pope had appointed as his regional representative in May. Cardinal D'Acquasparta responded forcefully. On September 23, 1300, he excommunicated the Florentine government and cast an interdict prohibiting public religious ceremonies before he left the city for Bologna.¹³

Spared excommunication only because his term as prior had ended, Dante disappeared from the historical radar for the next eight months. But the situation continued to deteriorate in ways that did not bode well for him. Although Boniface gestured toward reconciliation—he met with Florentine ambassadors and lifted the interdict—his motivations were opportunistic if not outright devious. At best, the pope sought better relations with Florence's White Guelph leaders so they would contribute troops for his military campaign in Tuscany against the Aldobrandeschi. At worst, he was biding his time until Prince Charles of Valois, brother of King Philip IV of France, could gather his forces and lay the groundwork for a Black Guelph takeover of Florence.

By setting his journey to the afterlife in the spring of 1300, Dante was able to embed prophecies in the *Commedia* that highlight Boniface's duplicitous strategy to harm the White Guelphs. The glutton Ciaccio, in the poem's first presentation of internecine Florentine politics, foretells how, within three years of the victory of "the rustic faction" ("la parte selvaggia" [*Inf.* 6.65]) (White Guelphs), the other party (Black Guelphs) will take over "by power of one who sails between the shoreline and the open sea" ("con la forza di tal che testé piaggia" [*Inf.* 6.69]). This cryptic reference to Boniface and his role in the partisan conflict—the nautical allusion indicates the deceptive maneuver of feigning neutrality to hide one's true goal—comes into clearer focus later in the poem. Only when Dante encounters in Paradise a blood relative (his great-great-grandfather) does he receive direct and detailed confirmation of his exile. He will have to leave Florence, Cacciaguida prophesies, because of "the plan, already set in motion, / that soon will bring success to him who plots it / where Christ is bought and sold each day" ("questo si vuole e questo già si cerca, / e tosto verrà fatto a chi ciò pensa / là dove Cristo tutto dí si merca" (*Par.* 17.49-51)).¹⁴ These scathing words leave no doubt that Dante considered Pope Boniface VIII, whom he elsewhere denigrates (through the mouth of another soul) as "Prince of the latter-day Pharisees" ("principe d'i novi Farisei" [*Inf.* 27.85]), the mastermind behind the political

¹³ Santagata, *Dante*, 132; Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 38.

¹⁴ My translation.

calamity that drove him and other White Guelphs from their native city.¹⁵

When Dante resurfaced in the historical record in April 1301, his designated activities ranged from advising on the method for selecting priors to supervising roadwork aimed at improving the transportation of goods into the city. The selection of priors, always serious business, was even more meaningful at this time because it would determine the city's role in the conflict between the Black and White Guelphs of Pistoia, a strategically important neighbor to the northwest. Violence between the rival factions of Pistoia became "the rehearsal ground for civil war in Florence."¹⁶ Dante made two other political decisions in 1301 that helped seal his fate. With Boniface's claim of impartiality in Florentine affairs now untenable, Dante joined the growing number of White Guelphs advocating a hardline approach toward the pope and his allies. On June 19, Dante spoke twice in opposition to Cardinal D'Acquasparta's request—favored by the priors and approved by multiple councils—for one hundred Florentine knights to support Boniface's war with the Aldobrandeschi. Three months later, on September 28, Dante weighed in on another case that would come back to haunt him, this time by voting with the majority. Many believed that the former *podestà* Cante de' Gabrielli had sentenced Neri Diodati to death for political reasons—namely, to harm the accused's father, Gherardino, who was Dante's friend and neighbor. The priors proposed amnesty for Neri, and the Council of One Hundred overwhelmingly approved the proposal. Cante surely remembered this revocation of his sentence when it came time for him to pass judgment on Dante and other White Guelph leaders.¹⁷ That time was fast approaching.

Charles of Valois descended into Italy with a modest contingent of five hundred knights in the summer of 1301. After stops in Turin, Milan, Modena, and Bologna, he passed through Florentine territory before continuing south (Siena, Orvieto, Viterbo) to meet with Boniface in Anagni, the pope's hometown southeast of Rome, on September 2. Boniface immediately commissioned Charles to lead papal military forces and elected him *paciaro* or "peacemaker" of Tuscany. This lofty title proved cruelly ironic. "Its purpose was just the opposite," wrote a contemporary Florentine, "for the pope's aim was to bring down the Whites and raise

¹⁵ My translation of *Inf.* 6.69 is based on commentary by Boccaccio and Francesco da Buti.

¹⁶ Santagata, *Dante*, 134.

¹⁷ Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 40–42; Santagata, *Dante*, 137.

up the Blacks, and make the Whites enemies of the royal house of France and of the Church.”¹⁸ Charles had already begun his journey back north by September 19, gathering the Black Guelphs interned at Castel della Pieve into his army before stopping at Siena on October 16. Florence, meanwhile, sought to lower the temperature by electing a Council of Priors less hostile to Boniface. Around the same time, the city and its ally Bologna sent a team of negotiators to meet with the pope in a last-ditch effort to avert disaster. Dino Compagni, who gives a vivid account of key moments in this rapidly unfolding story, was one of the new Florentine priors. With the benefit of hindsight, he captured the futility of these conciliatory actions. “We sought to make peace with them,” he wrote, “when we should have been sharpening our swords.”¹⁹

In recognition of Dante’s experience and abilities, he was chosen as one of three Florentine delegates for the diplomatic mission to Rome. His importance to the city’s welfare, according to Boccaccio, may actually have complicated the decision to include him. When Florentine leaders gathered “to consider who should be chief of this embassy, they all said it must be Dante,” who replied with two simple questions revealing both substantial ego and verbal dexterity: “If I go, who stays? If I stay, who goes?” It was “as though he alone among all the others had any worth,” Boccaccio commented, “or gave any worth to the rest.” If this portrait of Dante as the city’s indispensable leader is a case of narrative embellishment, it nonetheless accords with his well-earned reputation for having a “very proud and lofty disposition” and a high opinion of his abilities. The Florentine Giovanni Villani, who was fifteen years younger than Dante, claimed that the poet’s knowledge made him “somewhat proud and reserved and disdainful,” adding that, “after the fashion of a philosopher,” he was “careless of graces and not easy in his intercourse with laymen.”²⁰

Readers of Dante’s poem are hardly surprised when he acknowledges his prideful tendencies. While climbing the

¹⁸ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.2: “ma il proponimento era contrario, perché voleva abbattere i Bianchi e innalzare i Neri, e fare i Bianchi nimici della casa di Francia e della Chiesa.”

¹⁹ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.5: “Demo loro intendimento di trattar pace, quando si convenia arrotare i ferri”; Santagata, *Dante*, 137–38.

²⁰ Boccaccio, *Trattatello*, 478–79: “E venuto a deliberare chi dovesse essere prencipe di cotale legazione, fu per tutti detto che Dante fosse desso. Alla quale richesta Dante, alquanto sopra sé stato, disse: ‘Se io vo, chi rimane? Se io rimango, chi va?’ Quasi esso solo fosse colui che tra tutti valesse, e per cui tutti gli altri valessero”; 477: “Fu il nostro poeta . . . d’animo alto e disdegnoso molto”; Villani, *Nuova cronica* 10.136: “Questo Dante per lo suo savere fue alquanto presuntuoso e schifo e isdegnoso, e quasi a guisa di filosofo mal grazioso non bene sapea conversare co’ laici.”

Mountain of Purgatory with Virgil, he confesses to feeling the weight of the boulders bending the backs of the proud souls already crushing him. Dante tellingly admits this on the terrace of envy, a place where he anticipates spending very little time in his afterlife. Those who, like Dante, think so highly of themselves presumably find little to envy in others. On this terrace, he also notes that his name is not widely known—well, not yet, he says.²¹ Other revelations of Dante's pride rank among the most striking and entertaining moments in the *Commedia*, from his self-inclusion in a group of great Classical authors (Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan) and his claim to surpass two of them (Ovid and Lucan) to his identification with the great hero Ulysses and his observation that John the Evangelist follows him (“Giovanni è meco”) rather than the other way around.²² This apple apparently falls very close to the family tree: Dante is told in 1300 that his great-grandfather, Alighiero I, has been circling the terrace of pride, stooped under the weight of his boulder, for over one hundred years.²³ If Dante indeed met the happy spiritual destiny promised in the verses of his poem, we can easily picture him still toiling today—seven centuries after his death—under a heavy rock on the first terrace of Purgatory.²⁴

Boniface's reception of the White Guelph delegation in Rome says as much about the pope as Dante's declaration of indispensability says about the poet. Meeting alone with the ambassadors in a room of the Lateran Palace on or soon after October 20, 1301, the pontiff called for strict obedience while professing to have only good intentions. His opening question—“Why are you so obstinate?”—was really a rebuke requiring no answer except what the pope demanded: “Humble yourselves to me.” To do otherwise was an affront to the Vicar of Christ, who said “in truth” that he had “no intention other than to make peace among you.” Brooking no opposition to his authority, Boniface concluded the one-sided meeting by sending two ambassadors back to Florence with his

²¹ *Purg.* 14.21. Dante acknowledges his considerable pride and claims to be mostly free of envy in *Purg.* 13.133–38.

²² *Inf.* 4.100–102, 25.94–102, 26.19–24; *Purg.* 29.105. See Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 54–71.

²³ *Par.* 15.91–94.

²⁴ Not such an absurd proposition when we consider that Dante has the Latin poet Statius (died 96 CE) sprint around the terrace of sloth for over four centuries and then lie face down on the terrace of avarice and prodigality for another five-hundred-plus years (*Purg.* 21.67–69, 22.91–93).

conditional blessing: they would earn it by ensuring that the pope's "will is obeyed."²⁵

The ambassador who stayed behind was Dante. We do not know why he remained in Rome while Guido Ubaldini da Signa (nicknamed *il Corazza*) and Maso di Ruggerino Minerbetti returned to Florence. Perhaps the three Florentines decided among themselves which two should convey Boniface's message—demanding obedience to his will while promising peaceful intentions—to their fellow citizens. Perhaps they decided Dante should stay behind in the slim hope he could still use his considerable talents to influence the hardline pontiff. Far more likely, it was Boniface who decided who should stay and who should go. Detaining Dante—"a troublesome figure" who was "too well known"—was part of the pope's calculated strategy to remove or minimize potential impediments to his deceitful plan to undermine Florence's White Guelph government.²⁶ The Renaissance historian and biographer Leonardo Bruni, who served as chancellor of Florence in 1427-1444, wrote of Dante's time as prior: "Because he towered above his colleagues in intelligence and eloquence, they all showed the greatest respect for his wishes and direction."²⁷ If Dante even approached this level of intellect and persuasion, Boniface's decision to hold him in Rome looks like a smart preemptive move.

Therefore Dante was either still in Rome or on his way back home—perhaps having reached as far as Siena, less than fifty miles away—when Charles of Valois entered Florence on Wednesday, November 1, 1301—All Saints' Day—and set into motion a series of events leading to the overthrow of the government. With "beautiful, friendly words," Charles initially put the White Guelphs at ease, assuring them that he came "for their good" and to put the factions "in peace with one another." With now over a thousand horsemen at his command, he was granted entry by the Florentines, who received his unarmed soldiers with a colorful procession of their own troops. The French prince continued to speak of peace and civic order even as he colluded with Black Guelphs leaders—

²⁵ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.4: "Perché siete voi così ostinato? Umiliatevi a me, e io vi dico in verità che io non ho altra intenzione che di vostra pace. Tornate indietro due di voi, e abbiano la mia benedizione se procurano che sia ubidita la mia volontà." Dante's presence at Rome is noted by Compagni (*Cronica* 2.25) and Bruni (*Vita di Dante*, 545), with Compagni confirming the return to Florence of only the other two ambassadors (*Cronica* 2.11). See Santagata, *Dante*, 138-39.

²⁶ Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 44: "personaggio scomodo e troppo conosciuto."

²⁷ Bruni, *History* 4.57: "Quod autem ingenio et eloquentia inter collegas eminebat, voluntatem eius unius nutumque omnes maxime spectabant."

those in exile as well as those still in the city—to bring them to power. On November 4, the Black Guelphs secretly armed themselves and began to execute their plan to seize control of Florence. The next day—Sunday, November 5—proved decisive. The White Guelph leadership, still hoping for the best, ceded control of the city to Charles in the church of Santa Maria Novella. The prince, in return, swore an oath “as son of a king,” in which he “promised to keep the city in a peaceful and good state.” The chronicler Giovanni Villani, who was a witness to the ceremony, reported that Charles immediately violated this oath by having his men take up arms. The priors and other city officials realized they had been “betrayed and deceived.” This betrayal, wrote Leonardo Bruni, made Charles “look more like a tyrant than a prince.”²⁸

The treacherous plot took full effect that same day when, as planned, Corso Donati—whom Charles had promised to hang—entered Florence, accompanied by twelve companions, “like a brave and bold knight,” Corso promptly broke open the jails, freeing prisoners who joined his growing mob. The Cerchi and their followers were forced to take refuge in their homes and barricade the doors. Charles, meanwhile, kept up his charade of promising peace and evenhandedness by taking into custody the leaders of both parties, only to free the Black Guelphs right away while holding the White Guelphs overnight “without straw or mattresses, like murderers.” When a prominent Florentine supporter of the royal house of France informed the prince that “a noble city is dying under you,” he claimed to know “nothing about it.” At this point, all the stars were aligned for a complete Black Guelph victory: “We have the lord in our house; the pope is our protector. Our adversaries are not prepared for war or peace. They have no money; the soldiers are not paid.”²⁹

Deserted piazzas and city streets evoked an eerie atmosphere, a calm before the storm punctuated by an actual celestial event freighted with symbolic meaning. Dino Compagni, Dante’s contemporary, recalled seeing a “miraculous sign” in the night sky over Florence. High above the palace of the priors appeared a large red

²⁸ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.9, 2.15-16; Villani, *Nuova cronica* 9.49: “con belle e amichevoli parole rispondendo come venia per loro bene e stato, e per mettergli in pace insieme”; “come figliuolo di re promise di conservare la città in pacifico e buono stato”; “traditi e ingannati”; Bruni, *History* 4.63: “speciem tyranni magis praebuit quam principis.”

²⁹ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.18: “come ardito e franco cavaliere”; “sanza paglia e senza materasse, come uomini micidiali”; “‘Sotto di te perisce una nobile città!’ Al quale rispose che niente ne sapea”; 2.14: “Noi abbiamo il signore in casa; il papa è nostro protettore. Gli avversari nostri non sono guerniti né da guerra né da pace: danari non hanno, i soldati non sono pagati.”

cross, its arms some forty feet long. Hovering in the heavens “for as long as it takes a horse to run two laps,” this red cross was immediately understood as a sign of God’s disfavor “against our tormented city.” Another contemporary Florentine, Giovanni Villani, also reported on this celestial apparition, more accurately identifying it as a comet (*stella commata*) that, streaking across the sky, left behind “great rays of smoke.” The comet first appeared in September and was visible in the western portion of the sky over Florence through November 1301. The great Florentine painter Giotto also took note of the comet, later named for Edmond Halley (1656–1742), the British astronomer who calculated its periodic orbit. Giotto famously reimagined it as the Star of Bethlehem in the Adoration of the Magi in his fresco cycle in Padua’s Scrovegni Chapel (ca. 1303–1305). A Christian sign of peace and salvation in Giotto’s visual narrative, the comet was instead interpreted by wise astrologers of the time as a divine sign of “future danger and harm to Italian lands, and to the city of Florence” wrought by the arrival of Charles of Valois.³⁰

Like a battle signal, the comet—Compagni’s “blood-red cross”—appearing over Florence announced six days of terror, destruction, and violence unleashed by the Black Guelphs against their White Guelph neighbors and foes: “houses were set afire, robberies were committed, and belongings fled from the homes of the powerless. The powerful Blacks exhorted money from the Whites; they married young girls by force; they killed men.” The pillage, rape, and murder that ravaged the lawless city soon spread to the countryside as roving bands of malefactors robbed and burned houses for over eight days, laying waste to a “large number of beautiful, valuable properties.” Dante, though away at the time, was probably among the first targets of the vengeful gangs. In his absence, “a rush was made upon his house, which was plundered of everything he had, and all his possessions were devastated.” At best, Prince Charles of Valois—ostensibly committed to keeping the peace—turned a blind eye as “everything was defiled by looting

³⁰ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.19: “un segno maraviglioso”; “durò per tanto spazio, quanto penasse un cavallo a correre due aringhi”; “nostra città crucciato”; Villani, *Nuova cronica* 9.48: “grandi raggi di fummo”; “futuri pericoli e danni a la provincia d’Italia, e a la città di Firenze.” Bruni, *History* 4.62, also records the appearance of the comet as a sign of the arrival of Charles of Valois. On artistic depictions of the comet, including Giotto’s, see Roberta J. M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff, “New Information on Comet P/Halley as Depicted by Giotto di Bondone and Other Western Artists,” *Astronomy and Astrophysics* 187, nos. 1–2 (1987): 1–11, <http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1987A%26A...187....1O>. Last appearing in 1986, Halley’s Comet is due to return in 2061.

and bloodshed.”³¹ Corso Donati, known throughout the city as the “Baron” for his intimidating power and pride, was the worst offender of all. With the departure of Charles in the spring of 1302, Corso and his henchmen would become the true rulers of Florence, each of them warranting the title “destroyer of the city.”³² In the midst of this reign of terror, the powerless White Guelph priors resigned and a group of Black Guelphs took their place on November 8, 1301. The new priors, in turn, used the power of their office to inflict greater harm on their enemies by electing, with the approval of Charles of Valois, one of Corso Donati’s followers as the city’s *podestà* or chief magistrate.

Cante de’ Gabrielli was the zealous Black Guelph partisan who, during a previous stint as *podestà*, had passed the politically-motivated death sentence later revoked by Dante and other White Guelph leaders. He now had an opportunity to exact revenge, and he readily took it. It was Cante who issued the two proclamations that kept Dante from ever again stepping foot in his native city.³³ On January 27, 1302, he charged Dante, along with three other former priors, with numerous crimes committed while in office or after. The accusations included financial improprieties (acts of “barbarry, illegal gain, unjust extortion in money or goods”), meddling in elections of new priors and officials, providing funds used against Pope Boniface VIII and Charles of Valois by impeding the prince’s peace mission to Florence, and working to divide Pistoia and expel the city’s Black Guelphs.³⁴ Convicted *in absentia*, Dante was also hit with a hefty fine to be paid within three days of the sentence.³⁵ If he failed to meet the deadline, his remaining possessions would be confiscated and destroyed, and he would be banished from Tuscan territory for two years. His name would also be recorded in a public registry barring him—as a convicted “falsifier and

³¹ Compagni, *Cronica* 2.19: “le case si cominciavano ad ardere; le ruberie si faceano, e fuggivansi gli arnesi alle case degli impotenti; i Neri potenti domandavano danari a’ Bianchi; maritavansi fanciulle a forza; uccideansi uomini”; Villani, *Nuova cronica* 9.49: “grande numero di belle e ricche possessioni”; Bruni, *Vita di Dante*, 545: “gli fu corso a casa et rubato ogni sua cosa et dato il guasto alle sue possessioni”; *History* 4.64: “rapinis et vulneribus omnia foedata.”

³² Compagni, *Cronica* 2.20, 2.26: “guastatore della città.”

³³ Though Santagata finds it hard to imagine that Dante did not return to Florence right after the coup, before leaving the city for good at the end of 1301 or early in 1302 (*Dante*, 142–43).

³⁴ Ghezzi, *Il processo di Dante*, 197: “baractarias, lucra illicita, iniquas extorsiones in pecunia vel in rebus.” I cite the Latin text of the two sentences against Dante—and other primary source documents—from this edition.

³⁵ Santagata explains that 5000 small florins, while not exorbitant (equal to about 170 gold florins), was a considerable sum for someone of Dante’s means (*Dante*, 144).

barrator”—from ever again holding office or receiving communal benefits.³⁶

Dante wisely refused to appear before Cante de' Gabrielli to proclaim his innocence. Any attempt to do so would have proved futile or worse. Within three months of the initial sentence, the goal of the victorious Black Guelphs turned “from purge to vendetta,” a change most likely triggered by a meeting of White Guelphs with Ghibellines laying the groundwork for a future alliance of the two exiled parties. Viewing such conduct as “tantamount to treason,” Cante issued a second sentence on March 10, 1302, that reflected this vengeful approach.³⁷ He again charged Dante (this time along with fourteen others) with crimes of “bartrary, unjust extortion, and illegal gain.” But he now issued a harsher sentence because the accused had failed to appear in person to answer the charges, his absence taken as an admission of guilt. This sentence condemned Dante to “be burned with fire until he dies,” should he “at any time come within the power of the commune.”³⁸ The legalese is inelegant but frightfully clear: we catch you anywhere near Florence, you die.

The threat made a strong impression on Dante, who testified in his *Commedia* to the historical practice of death by fire. Master Adam, a counterfeiter of florins, was burned alive for his crimes, information the poet has another character gleefully announce to the world from the place in Hell assigned to falsifiers (*Inf.* 30.109–110). Since authorities executed Adam in or near Florence in 1281, a young Dante may have witnessed the public event. He certainly did not forget the sight of other burned bodies, as we learn in one of the most gripping moments of his journey through the afterlife. On the seventh and final terrace of Mount Purgatory, Dante encounters penitent souls atoning for their lustful inclinations within a wall of fire extending across the entire terrace. Singing “*Beati mundo corde*” (“Blessed are the pure of heart”), an angel gives Dante the disheartening news that he can only advance by entering the fire (*Purg.* 27.7–13). Bending forward, the poet already feels like a dead man: “I stared into the fire,” he says, “my mind fixed on the image of human bodies I once saw being burned” (“guardando il foco e imaginando forte / umani corpi già veduti accesi”

³⁶ Ghezzi, *Il processo di Dante*, 198: “falsarii et baracterii.” Dante characterizes bartrary—a catchall for malfeasance by public officials—as a sin of fraud in the *Inferno* (cantos 21–22).

³⁷ Santagata, *Dante*, 144–45.

³⁸ Ghezzi, *Il processo di Dante*, 200: “baracteriarum, iniquarum extorsionum et illicitorum lucrorum”; “ullo tempore in fortiam dicti comunis pervenerit, talis perveniens igne comburatur sic quod moriatur.”

[*Purg.* 27.17-18]). Virgil finally convinces Dante to follow him into the flames—hotter than molten glass—by dangling the prospect of reaching Beatrice on the other side (*Purg.* 27.34-54).

Condemned in 1302 to banishment under pain of death, Dante never again entered the city where he was born and had lived for thirty-six years. At first he probably held out hope of returning to Florence, even playing a leading role in planning operations to do so. But by July 20, 1304, when the White Guelphs were soundly defeated in battle just north of Florence (La Lastra), Dante had already broken with his fellow exiles, becoming—as he will have his blessed ancestor Cacciaguida say in the *Commedia*—“a party of [himself] alone” (“parte per [se] stesso” [*Par.* 17.69]). In *De vulgari eloquentia*, the incomplete Latin treatise on vernacular language he began in 1303-1304, Dante wrote that, unlike those who believe their native city to be the best place under the sun, he came to see the entire world as his homeland, “like the sea to fish.” His exile was unjust and his pain so deep precisely because he “love[d] Florence so much.”³⁹

The poet bares his soul in another work written (and left incomplete) during those first years in exile. In the first book of the *Convivio*, a philosophical treatise composed in Italian (1304-1307), he lamented:

Since it was the pleasure of the citizens of the most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome, Florence, to cast me out of her sweet bosom—where I was born and bred up to the pinnacle of my life, and where, with her good will, I desire with all my heart to rest my weary mind and to complete the span of time that is given to me—I have traveled like a stranger, almost like a beggar, through virtually all the regions to which this tongue of ours extends, displaying against my will the wound of fortune for which the wounded one is often unjustly accustomed to be held accountable.

Dante still held Florence dear—wishing “with all [his] heart” to return—despite having been cast out and set adrift like a “ship without sail or rudder, brought to different ports, inlets, and shores by the dry wind that painful poverty blows.” Life in exile was clearly a hardship. Deprived of home and possessions, Dante was forced to move from place to place—“almost like a beggar”—in search of refuge. A proud man, he also worried that his reputation

³⁹ *DVE* 1.6.3: “Nos autem, cui mundus est patria velut piscibus equor . . . et Florentiam adeo diligamus ut, quia dileximus, exilium patiamur iniuste.” I cite *De vulgari eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

and image would suffer. The poet feared that people familiar with his works and good name would think less of them upon encountering him in such a reduced state.⁴⁰

Painful as it was for Dante, his cruel exile from Florence in 1302 was a great gift to humanity. Imagine if all had gone well, the British essayist Thomas Carlyle mused in 1840, and Dante had been elected “Prior, Podestà, or whatsoever they call it, of Florence, well accepted among neighbors.” Florence, in this counterfactual history, “would have had another prosperous Lord Mayor,” but the world “would have had no *Divina Commedia* to hear!” Even more provocatively, Giosuè Carducci, the celebrated nineteenth-century Italian poet and patriot, addressed a sonnet to Cante de’ Gabrielli, marveling that Italy had yet to adorn one of its piazzas with a statue of the man who sent Dante into exile. Erecting this statue would enable Italians to honor the “handsome, severe mug” of Dante’s “first and only motivator.” For unjustly banishing Dante based on politically-motivated charges (“when you condemned him as a thief and barrator”), Cante, not Beatrice, deserves the title of muse for the poet’s *Commedia*, his masterpiece of “glory and vengeance.”⁴¹

Dante was not nearly so sanguine about his exile in those first years away from Florence. He traveled often and widely after his banishment, with known or probable stays in Forlì, Verona, Arezzo, Bologna, Treviso, Venice, Padua, Lunigiana, Casentino, Lucca, Forlì (again), Turin, Asti, Vercelli, Milan, Casentino (again), Genoa, Pisa, and Verona (again), before arriving in Ravenna, his final refuge, most likely in 1318. Villani and Boccaccio claimed that he even journeyed as far as Paris, unlikely as that was, though a recent biographer conjectures that he visited the papal court in

⁴⁰ *Conv.* 1.3.4-5: “Poi che fu piacere de li cittadini de la bellissima e famosissima figlia di Roma, Fiorenza, di gittarmi fuori del suo dolce seno—nel quale nato e nutrito fui in fino al colmo de la vita mia, e nel quale, con buona pace di quella, desidero con tutto lo cuore di riposare l’animo stancato e terminare lo tempo che m’è dato—, per le parti quasi tutte a le quali questa lingua si stende, peregrino, quasi mendicando, sono andato, mostrando contra mia voglia la piaga de la fortuna, che suole ingiustamente al piagato molte volte essere imputata. Veramente io sono stato legno senza vela e senza governo, portato a diversi porti e foci e liti dal vento secco che vapora la dolorosa povertade.” I cite *Convivio*, ed. Piero Cudini, 6th ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 2005), translated by Richard Lansing (New York: Garland, 1990).

⁴¹ Thomas Carlyle, “The Hero as Poet: Dante,” in *Italian Poets and English Critics, 1755-1859: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Beatrice Corrigan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 188-207, at 195; Giosuè Carducci, “A messer Cante Gabrielli da Gubbio,” in *Giambi ed Epodi*, ed. Enzo Palmieri (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1960), 194-95: “bel ceffo austere”; “o primo, o solo ispirator di Dante”; “quando ladro il dannaste e barattiero”; “gloria e vendetta.”

Avignon (Provence) in 1309.⁴² In letters spanning the years 1304 through 1311, Dante called himself a Florentine who had been exiled undeservedly (*exul inmeritus*). He made this self-presentation to audiences ranging from regional noblemen and a fellow poet-exile to the rulers and people of Italy, Emperor Henry VII, and the “most iniquitous Florentines within the city.”⁴³

Dante was in Forlì when Henry VII of Luxemburg, having received papal confirmation of his election as emperor (with the coronation set for February 2, 1312 in Rome), crossed the Alps into Italy in October 1310. Poor decisions, political resistance, betrayals, and ill luck ultimately combined to doom Henry’s imperial mission to reconcile warring factions and pacify Italy. But Dante had high hopes for Henry, whose death from illness on August 24, 1313, ended any near-term possibility of a leader fulfilling the poet’s ideal of a supreme earthly ruler: a monarch directly ordained by God to lead all humankind “to temporal happiness in conformity with the teachings of philosophy.”⁴⁴ Calling Henry “another Moses” chosen to lead Italy from oppression to the promised land, Dante closely followed the emperor’s Italian campaign and later reserved a place for “noble Henry” among the blessed souls in the Celestial Rose of Paradise (*Par.* 30.133–38).⁴⁵

Florentine opposition to Henry widened the breach between Dante and his native city. Chances of a pardon—and the poet’s acceptance of one—bringing him home from exile diminished with the conflict between the emperor and the most intransigent Guelph city. In his letter of March 31, 1311, Dante excoriated his former compatriots—“most foolish of the Tuscans, insensate alike by nature and by corruption”—for their refusal to submit to the authority of “the Roman Emperor, the king of the earth, and minister of God.” Like a prophet, he warned Florence that, unless it changed course, Henry would administer divine justice. “Your city,” Dante foresaw, “worn out with ceaseless mourning, shall be delivered at the last into the hands of the stranger, after the greatest

⁴² Villani, *Cronica nuova* 10.136; Boccaccio, *Trattatello*, 443–44; Santagata, *Dante*, 212–15.

⁴³ *Epist.* 2, 3, 5, 6, 7. I cite *Epistole*, ed. Angelo Jacomuzzi, vol. 2 of *Opere minori di Dante Alighieri* (Turin: UTET, 1986), translated by Paget Toynbee, *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920); *Epist.* 6.1, 386): “scelestissimis Florentinis intrinsecis.”

⁴⁴ *Mon.* 3.15.10 (3.16.10 in Prue Shaw’s translation): “Imperatore, qui secundum philosophica documenta genus humanum ad temporalem felicitatem dirigeret.” I cite *Monarchia*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Milan: Mondadori, 1965), translated by Prue Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ *Epist.* 5.4, 374: “Moysen alium.”

part of you has been destroyed in death or captivity; and the few that shall be left to endure exile shall witness her downfall with tears and lamentation.”⁴⁶ Now in his ninth year of exile, the poet imagined his suffering coming back to punish the city that had inflicted it on him.

Less than three weeks later, in the face of continued Florentine resistance, Dante wrote directly to Henry. He urged the emperor, bogged down in a siege of Brescia in Northern Italy, to hurry to Florence and punish the rebels. Dismayed by Henry’s delay, the poet sprang one of his most ruthless verbal attacks on Florence, calling his native city a “baleful pest” whose “jaws pollute even now the rushing stream of Arno,” a “viper that turns against the vitals of her own mother.” Spearheading Guelph opposition to the emperor in Italy, Florence was “the sick sheep that infects the flock of her lord with her contagion.” Donning the mantle of a biblical prophet, Dante called on Henry to become a new David and “overthrow this Goliath” with the “sling of his wisdom” and the “stone of his strength.” “The Philistines shall flee and Israel shall be delivered,” Dante proclaimed, meaning that Henry’s defeat of Florence will free Italy.⁴⁷

It is little wonder, then, that Dante was explicitly excluded from an amnesty allowing for the return of Florentine exiles. Part of the reforms promulgated by Baldo d’Aguglione, a prior and judge, on September 2, 1311, this conditional amnesty was hardly altruistic. Roiled by internal conflicts and fearing Henry’s imperial forces, Florence sought to foster domestic harmony and strengthen its military capabilities by depriving Henry of potential supporters and fighters while bolstering the city’s own defenses. But the 1311 reform did not apply to all political exiles. It excluded not only Ghibellines but also White Guelphs banished by Cante de’ Gabrielli in 1302. Dante’s name was therefore listed among the ineligible exiles—a total of some fifteen hundred individuals—though his treasonous call for Henry to destroy the city makes it hard to imagine that Florence would have allowed him to return under any

⁴⁶ *Epist.* 6.21, 394: “Tuscorum vanissimi, tam natura quam vitio insensati”; 6.5, 388: “romani Principis, mundi regis et Dei ministri”; 6.17, 392: “urbem diutino merore confectam in manus alienorum tradi finaliter, plurima vestri parte seu nece seu captivitate perperdita, perpersuri exilium pauci cum fletu cernetis.”

⁴⁷ *Epist.* 7.23, 408: “Sarni fluentia torrentis adhuc rictus eius inficiunt, et Florentia . . . dira hec pernicies nuncupatar”; 7.24 (p. 408): “Hec est vipera versa in viscera genitricis; hec est languida pecus gregem domini sui sua contagione commaculans”; 7.29, 410: “Goliam hunc in funda sapientie tue atque in lapide virium tuarum prosterna. . . fugient Philistei et liberabitur Israel.”

circumstances.⁴⁸ Henry was crowned emperor in Rome—in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran, not at Saint Peter’s—on June 29, 1312. But by the time he attacked Florence in September, his forces were inadequate to take the city and he was forced to lift the siege a month later. Henry’s sudden death the following year dashed Dante’s hopes for political renewal brought about by a strong imperial presence in Italy.

The emperor had fallen but Florence soon faced another external threat, this time from Ugucione della Faggiuola, a Ghibelline warlord who had strongly supported Henry. Ugucione, ruler of Pisa and Lucca, was well known to Dante. He may even have hosted the poet in 1307. In grim economic straits and at war with Ugucione, an alarmed Florence again took preventive action to blunt enemy advantages. This strategic amnesty, approved on May 19, 1315, probably applied to all political exiles but with strict conditions: payment of a portion of the original fine and admission of guilt through a ritual offering to John the Baptist, the city’s patron saint, on his feast day of June 24. Florence sought to replenish its coffers with the discounted fine. Even at only five percent, the cumulative payment by thousands of exiles was substantial. The ceremony required that the penitents, dressed in sackcloth with a cowl on their head and a candle in hand, walk in procession from the prison to the church to seek forgiveness.⁴⁹

An admission of guilt was not something Dante would ever offer. He made this abundantly clear in a letter to a Florentine friend, written within a few weeks of the conditional pardon. This friend, like others, had urged Dante to accept the amnesty, to bury the hatchet and come home. Rejecting terms he found unjust and humiliating, the poet instead struck a defiant pose. “Can I not anywhere gaze upon the face of the sun and the stars?” he wrote. “Can I not under any sky contemplate the most precious truths, without first returning to Florence, disgraced, nay dishonored, in the eyes of my fellow citizens?” Besides, he said in concluding the letter, “bread will surely not be lacking,” a sharp departure from his earlier protestations of poverty in exile.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 76–79; Barbi, *Life of Dante*, 25–26; Santagata, *Dante*, 255–56.

⁴⁹ Ghezzi, *Il processo di Dante*, 201–11; Brafa Misicoro, *Le vicende giudiziarie*, 91–92; Santagata, *Dante*, 298–99.

⁵⁰ *Epist.* 12.9, 436: “nonne solis astrorumque specula ubique conspiciam? nonne dulcissimas veritates potero speculari ubique sub celo, ni prius inglorium ymo ignominiosum populo Florentineque civitati me reddam? Quippe nec panis deficiet.” I have slightly modified Toynbee’s translation.

After Ugucione routed Guelph forces at the Battle of Montecatini on August 29, 1315, Florence made another attempt to improve its security by offering political exiles an opportunity to return. An order from September, now lost, commuted Cante de' Gabrielli's death sentences to internment outside Florence at a location to be determined by the judge, Ranieri di Zaccaria da Orvieto. Exiles agreeing to this new amnesty were required to appear before the magistrate and pay a fee guaranteeing compliance with the internment. For the majority of exiles who, like Dante, failed to appear and comply, Ranieri issued an order on October 15 declaring them guilty of rebellion against Florence and harming the city with their actions. Dante was thus once again condemned to death, this time by beheading rather than fire, the sentence now endangering his sons as well. Pietro and Jacopo, having passed the age of fourteen, were subject by Florentine law to penalties of their father, with whom they were living in exile. The crude language of the death sentence once again spoke to the harsh animus behind it: if the convicted men should "at any time fall into the power of the Commune of Florence," the order specified, "they will be brought to the chopping block, where their heads will be cut off their shoulders so that they definitively die." For good measure, Ranieri repeated the death sentence against Dante and his sons on November 6, worsening the penalty by adding an ominous provision that increased the chances of it being carried out. From this point forward, anyone had permission "to harm them in property and person, freely and with impunity."⁵¹

Dante's willingness to burn bridges with Florence in 1315 showed confidence born of improved circumstances. By then he was probably living in Verona as an honored guest of Cangrande della Scala. A strong Ghibelline ruler, Cangrande—like Ugucione della Faggiuola (who later joined him in Verona)—had been a fervent supporter of Henry VII of Luxemburg during his ill-fated Italian campaign. Dante was already familiar with Verona from an earlier stay in 1303–1304, when he was the guest of Cangrande's older brother, Bartolomeo della Scala. Dante had begun writing the *Paradiso* by 1315–1316, having published the *Inferno* in 1314 and the *Purgatorio* the following year. The poet's respect and affection for Cangrande is evident from a letter in which he dedicated the *Paradiso* to "the magnificent and most victorious Lord, the Lord Can

⁵¹ Ghezzi, *Il processo di Dante*, 212: "quo tempore pervenerit in fortiam comunis Florentie, quod ad locum iustitie ducantur et ibi eis et cuilibet eorum caput a spatulis amputetur ita quod penitus moriantur"; 214: "offendendi in habere et persona, libere et impune"; Santagata, *Dante*, 300–301.

Grande della Scala, Vicar-General of the most holy principality of Caesar in the city of Verona, and town of Vicenza.” Seeking to reciprocate the “most precious treasure” of Cangrande’s friendship, Dante found that the only worthy gift he had to offer was “the sublime cantica of the *Comedy*.”⁵²

Dante still identified himself as Florentine, but with a difference. No longer wearing the piteous badge of “undeserved exile,” he now claimed the more scathing title of “Florentine by birth, not by disposition.”⁵³ Written in 1316, Dante’s letter conveyed gratitude toward his friend and benefactor in Verona. It also demonstrated the poet’s more complex and mature understanding of his exile now that he was well into the writing of the *Paradiso*: by this time, perhaps in 1317–1318, he had passed the midpoint and had written canto seventeen. He never celebrated his banishment from Florence—or the man who sentenced him—purely or primarily as the catalyst for lasting glory, something only later admirers like Carlyle and Carducci could do. Nor did he obsess on it as the source of utter misery. He learned instead to accept the “bitter” with the “sweet” of his exile, as he says upon hearing a full-blown prophecy of it from his great-great-grandfather in the sphere of Mars (*Par.* 18.3).

On the one hand, Cacciaguida tells Dante, “you shall leave behind all you most dearly love” (“tu lascerai ogne cosa diletta / piú caramente” [*Par.* 17.55–56]) when Pope Boniface VIII’s plot, implemented by Prince Charles of Valois and the Black Guelphs, drives him from Florence. Adding insult to injury, Dante and other White Guelphs will be blamed for their misfortune. Not mincing words, Cacciaguida foresees the exiled poet—separated from his family, home, and possessions—suffering the hardships of displacement, having to rely on the mercy and good will of others for such basics as food and shelter. Dante will learn that bread in other lands is salted (unlike in Florence), he will know “how hard is the way, going down and then up another man’s stairs” (“come è duro calle / lo scendere e ‘l salir per l’altrui scale” [*Par.* 17.59–60]). Worst of all, he will have to endure the incompetence and betrayal of his comrades in exile, a “wicked and witless” bunch of “utterly

⁵² *Epist.* 13.1, 438: “Magnifico atque victorioso domino domino Cani Grandi de la Scala sacratissimi Cesarei Principatus in urbe Verona et civitate Vicentie Vicario generali”; 13.9, 441: “thesaurum carissimum”; 13.11, 442: “sublimem canticam.” I follow Hollander and others in accepting Dante’s authorship of (at least) the epistolary portion of the letter, commonly referred to as the “Epistle to Cangrande.” See Robert Hollander, *Dante’s Epistle to Cangrande* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

⁵³ *Epist.* 13.1, 438: “florentinus natione non moribus.”

ungrateful, mad, and faithless” men (“la compagnia malvagia e scempia . . . tutta ingrata, tutta matta ed empia” [*Par.* 17.62-64]). Reduced to a party of one, Dante will become, as one scholar puts it, an “exile among exiles.”⁵⁴

On the other, “sweeter” hand, the poet will live to see the demise of many of those responsible for his exile, not least Pope Boniface VIII (October 11, 1303) and Corso Donati (October 6, 1308). Nor will his feckless companions in exile avoid a harsh reckoning. Whether from shame, bloody injuries, or both, that group (not Dante) “shall soon have their brows reddened” (“n’avrà rossa la tempia” [*Par.* 17.66]) during several ill-advised military operations.⁵⁵ With Bartolomeo della Scala—the “noble Lombard”—providing his “first refuge,” Dante will also rejoice in meeting Cangrande, only nine years old in 1300, who will have achieved renown by the time the poet finds refuge in Verona for the second time (*Par.* 17.70-81). Sweetest of all, Dante learns that his revelation of the afterlife—the “sacred poem” that has made him “lean for many years” (*Par.* 25.1-3)—though it tastes bitter at first, once “swallowed and digested” will provide “vital nourishment” to an ailing world (“vital nodrimento / lascerà poi, quando sarà digesta” [*Par.* 17.131-32]). By writing the *Commedia*, a work of enduring ethical and aesthetic value, Dante will ensure his fame among “those to whom our times will be the ancient days” (“coloro / che questo tempo chiameranno antico” [*Par.* 17.119-20]).

On that score, Dante was indisputably right: his vexed political life, while not something to have wished for, provided the conditions, motivation, and source material needed to create a literary masterpiece for the ages. The *Divine Comedy*, in turn, has generated an adventurous political afterlife for the poet by inspiring engaged readers to promote causes and confront crises of later times. A cultural hero of Renaissance Florence, Dante played a starring role in the Risorgimento as the ancestral father and prophet of the new Italian nation, a role later refashioned by fascists and other ultranationalists into a perverse endorsement of war, tyranny, and colonization.⁵⁶ The poet’s political influence resonates even today in the United States. In a period of toxic political instability and polarization, Dante’s harsh condemnation of moral cowardice, as seen in his denigration of wretched souls devoid of conviction and

⁵⁴ Anne Paolucci, “Exile Among Exiles: Dante’s Party of One,” *Mosaic* 8 (1975): 117-25.

⁵⁵ My translation.

⁵⁶ I discuss at length these and other examples of the poet’s cultural and political afterlife, with extensive documentation, in *Dante’s Bones*.

backbone in the periphery of Hell (*Inf.* 3.31–69), has recently been taken up by Black Lives Matter activists and supporters to urge action against police brutality and systemic racism.⁵⁷

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global health crisis with severe economic and political effects, is also touched by Dante and his legacy. I write these words on September 4, 2020, one day before Italian President Sergio Mattarella opens the ceremonies in Ravenna for a year-long celebration culminating with the 700th anniversary of the poet's death in 2021.⁵⁸ As of this date, the online dashboard of the World Health Organization shows that there have been 26,121,199 confirmed cases of the virus, including 864,618 deaths, 184,614 of them in the United States alone.⁵⁹ I suspect that many essays and talks on Dante in the coming year will begin or end, as I do here, by looking to the *Divine Comedy* (and to the life that created it) for understanding, solace, and hope—"vital nourishment"—in a world desperately in need of them all.

⁵⁷ Guy P. Raffa, "There's a Special Place in Dante's *Inferno* for Wafflers and Neutral Souls," *Zócalo Public Square*, August 31, 2020: <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2020/08/31/dante-divine-comedy-2020-neutrality/ideas/essay>. My sources for tracing this tradition of adopting Dante's condemnation of neutrality, from Teddy Roosevelt and World War I through John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., include Deborah Parker, "The Historical Presidency: JFK's Dante," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 48 (2018): 357–72; Akash Kumar, "Teddy Roosevelt, Dante, and the Man in the Arena," Digital Dante, Columbia University: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/history/teddy-roosevelt-dante-kumar>; and Laura Ingallinella, "The Hottest Place in Hell: Neutrality and the Politicization of Dante in the United States," lauraingallinella.org, June 8, 2020: <https://lauraingallinella.org/2020/06/08/hottest-place-in-hell-dante-neutrality>.

⁵⁸ Ravenna Festival Live: <https://www.ravennafestival.live/events/dante700/>.

⁵⁹ "WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard," *World Health Organization*: <https://covid19.who.int/>. The US also leads the way at this time with 6,050,444 cases, and still reports over 1000 deaths a day. Italy, by comparison, has had 6 deaths in the last 24 hours.