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“Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost.”
Dante Alighieri’s epic three-part poem, La Comedia, or The Divine Comedy—among the world’s supreme masterworks—insists that the modern reader reconsider everything he thought he knew. Life and death can only be recognized for what they truly are under the aspect of eternity. Earthly existence is not an inexplicable accident or a gift simply to be savored, but rather a daily trial of every genuine virtue, even an ordeal that must be endured with Christ-like fortitude. Bearing agonies here in the name of God will earn you eternal joys far exceeding any that this world holds; failing to love God will earn you eternal agonies, and these too, Dante instructs, blaze forth from God’s everlasting love, which is no less loving for operating with implacable justice.

These were once the essential truths of Christian belief, with of course the addendum that only through the Church can one hope for salvation. Seldom if ever does one encounter them today in the pulpit or a theological text. The updated Christian deity refrain from stewing flat-terers in excrement, prostrating gluttons under a chill filthy sleet, sending the lustful airborne in hurricane winds, submerging the sullen in black swamp-water, bombarding homosexuals with a rain of fire, boiling murderers in rivers of blood, turning thieves into serpents and then into ash, imprisoning suicides in thorn bushes whose broken branches bleed like wounds, or compelling sowers of discord to walk forever with their severed heads in their hands, as He does in Dante’s Inferno. The renowned 20th-century Catholic theologian Hans Ur von Balthasar hoped that all men would ultimately be saved; Pope John Paul II, not exactly a liberal churchman, found this idea to his liking. Actual liberal churchmen go further, deny that ours is a fallen world, and assert that Christ’s fundamental teaching is that you are all right just as you are. God’s love today is often non-judgmental and basically painless.

Dante would have placed such pallid believers in the red-hot tombs where heretics roast, world without end. He was the poetic paragon of the medieval mind, which is unforgivably barbaric to many modern eyes, but was nevertheless the soaring intelligence that constructed Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologica and the Gothic cathedrals. These indefatigable builders of the elaborate and ideal—none more fervent and comprehensive than Dante—aimed at what the eminent art historian Erwin Panofsky in Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism (1951) called “totality…one perfect and final solution.”

The inescapable modern association of that last phrase also brings Dante arrestingly to mind. Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Nazi death camp Treblinka, described the place as “Dante’s Inferno, it was Dante come to life.” It took 20th-century industry and ingenuity to realize here on earth Dante’s vision of Hell. Attempts to realize an earthly paradise have been less successful.

Tastes change, and Dante’s greatness was not always a settled fact. Learned contemporaries faulted him for writing his masterpiece in the Tuscan vernacular rather than in Latin. Renaissance humanists found the gruesomeness of Dante’s Hell emetic and the effulgence of his being blinding, and he yielded rank to new generations of irreverent doubters and outright unbelievers. The greatest descendant of these humanists, Goethe, set down in his Italian Journey a Roman conversation in which he veered from warm praise for Dante to utter bafflement that anyone “could take the trouble to read these poems. I thought the Inferno absolutely horrible, the Purgatorio ambiguous, and the Paradiso a bore.” (He is commonly taken at his word here, though it is possible he manufactured his distaste on the spot, annoyed by an unpleasant interlocutor.)

Dante’s standing as profound spiritual vision, however, has its distinguished stalwarts. Samuel Taylor Coleridge esteemed Dante’s “combination of poetry with doctrine, which is one of the characteristics of Christian poetry.” Thomas Carlyle pronounced Dante “world-deep” and deplored the Romantic vogue for the Inferno at the expense of the other canticles, attributing it to “our general Byronism of taste, [which] is like to be a transient feeling.” (It was not, at least where the Inferno is concerned.) And the arch-Romantic Percy Bysshe Shelley also defied the taste of his age, and of our own, declaring the Purgatorio superior to the Inferno and the Paradiso most excellent of all.

The best translation I know, and the one I quote from in this essay, is that of Robert Hollander, who taught Dante for many years at Princeton, and his wife, Jean, an accomplished poet (2000-07). But there are several useful and handsomely rendered translations available. The 1939 literal prose version by John D. Sinclair has essentially been superseded by the 1975 literal prose version by Charles S. Singleton, but both remain exemplary. Allen Mandelbaum’s blank verse translation (1980-84) is elegant to the point of stateliness when called for and plainspoken enough when need be, and the Everyman’s Library edition (1995) of his translation has many of Sandro Botticelli’s masterly illustrations. Robert Pinsky’s Inferno (1994) makes a game effort to recast Dante’s terza rima (aba bcb cdc, etc.) with plausible near-rhymes (nature, venture, father, to choose at random), and overcomes a number of forgivable clunkers for a sometimes brilliant success. W.S. Merwin’s Purgatorio (2000) in free verse makes one wish he would translate the other two canticles. All the above editions except Mandelbaum’s have the Italian original on the left-hand page, and Singleton, Mandelbaum, and the Hollanders have the most extensive explanatory notes and commentary.

Politics

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265, the son of a businessman with many iron in many fires, and he was baptized Durante, a name he would refuse to go by. His most recent and quite elegant and exhaustive biographer, the Pisan scholar Marco Santagata, in Dante: The Story of His Life (2016), writes that in the mantic etymologizing popular then, “the name Dante indicates that its holder, through his works, generously gives” (dà) to others his great intellectual gifts received from God.” So too the name Beatrice suggests a woman blessed herself and the cause of blessedness in others; and his first encounter with Beatrice Portinari, known as Bice, when she was eight years old and he was nine, leveled him with an erotic thunderbolt that likely triggered an epileptic fit—a persistent affliction that he would associate with visionary powers unleashed, Santagata believes. Thus began the love of his life, unrequited in actuality but fervent—extraordinary enough when need be—to his poetry and effusion in poetic prose, recounts the love—which Beatrice’s marriage to another man and her death at 24 intensified rather than diminished. The work ends with Dante’s vow to “yet write concerning her what hath
not before been written of any woman.” (in the translation by the Victorian poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti).

Alighieri would honor that vow. It will be Beatrice in The Divine Comedy who goes from heaven to hell in order to enlist the poet Virgil as Dante’s guide to the depths of the inferno and up the mountain of purgatory. Beatrice herself will take over from Virgil in the upper reaches of purgatory, beyond which the pagan soul cannot go, and she will lead Dante through paradise, for she fears that Dante’s spiritual desolation might cause him to be lost forever. He will be saved by this panoramic indoctrination into divine love, light, and justice, fitting him to resume his earthly life renewed and ready to write of the other world, and its meaning for this one.

Besides love earthly and divine, politics both earthly and divine shaped Dante’s life and work. Santagata gives a thorough rendering of the strife between the Guelf and Ghibelline factions in Dante’s Italy, the former the party of the pope, the latter that of the Holy Roman Emperor, the conflict having begun, in Italy, during the reign of Frederick I (1152–1190) of the House of Hohenstaufen. Frederick had leagued his power from Germany to southern Italy, and the papacy feared its own territories in central Italy and Romagna, the “possessions of Saint Peter,” would be crushed between the two imperial dominions. The Ghibellines seized control of Florence, but their dominance was short-lived; in 1266 the Guelfs got their own back.

At the University of Bologna Dante’s studies in philosophy, natural science, and the great classical poets—Ovid, Statius, Lucan, and Virgil—took his mind off Florentine politics and were crucial to forming his vocation. For quite a long time philosophy would be his sustenance and ecstasy, offering strength and solace after the death of Beatrice in 1290. Back in Florence, he immersed himself as well in theological studies at the schools of the clerics, the Franciscan Santa Croce and the Dominican Santa Maria Novella. Despite Thomas Aquinas’s appropriation of Aristotle for sacred purpose, theology and philosophy kept their distance from each other, but Dante took in all he could of both—though in the earthly paradise atop the mountain of purgatory Beatrice chides him for having followed Lady Philosophy and strayed thereby from the ultimate truth.

About the age of 30, Santagata writes, Dante “would become possessed by the demon of politics.” From 1295 he rose in the ranks of municipal authorities, not elected at first but appointed by influential friends, elevated eventually in 1300 to serve a term in the College of Priors, the principal governors of Florence. But his politicking made him a marked man. The Florentine Guelfs had been riven in 1293 over the place in political affairs of “the so-called popolo minuto (artisans and small businesses),” who led a successful uprising against the magnates of “the banking oligarchy and the great property investors.” The tensions between the populist Cerchi family—Dante was a Cerchi adherent—and the aristocratic Donati, leaders of the White and the Black Guelfs respectively, escalated from street violence to Black insurrection in 1300. Black Guelf outrage festered over the next year, and Dante was a particular object of their hatred.

Exile

After a decisive black military victory, Dante was among hundreds of Whites who went voluntarily into exile. In his absence he was sentenced to fines and internment for the trumped-up charges of selling his votes as a prior, illegal gain, and extortion, and when he did not return to prove his innocence the penalty was enhanced to death by burning at the stake.

Dante would never return to his native city. His first biographer, Giovanni Boccaccio (author of The Decameron), writes that Dante never saw his wife again—she and their children were expelled from Florence as well, as the vengeful Blacks turned the screw ever tighter—but Santagata believes they were reunited for a short while years later. Dante remained a White Guelf devotee at first, serving as secretary in the exiles’ coalition, drafting correspondence and dispatches, and planning military strategy. Bereft not only of his city but of his cherished books, he found on a diplomatic mission to Verona in 1303, as Santagata relates, a library greater than any he had known, “the Biblioteca Capitolare, consisting of works dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries amassed by the cathedral chapter. By the mid-1200s, its collection of books, including a wealth of classical texts, had given great momentum to the rediscovery of ancient authors, and would continue to do so during the time of Petrarch.” This trove held treasures unavailable in Florence or Bologna, but he did not stay in Verona more than a few months, on the move with political business in hand, until he decided to break with his comrades in exile, leave the wars behind, and constitute what he called “a party on his own.”

Santagata conjectures, in the absence of documentation, that Dante went to Bologna a year later, drawn by the prospect of intellectual companionship, modern philosophy texts unknown in Verona, and the chance to earn
some money privately teaching Latin to university students. In 1306, however, the Black Guelfs took over control of Bologna, vowing "to exterminate forever the Ghibelines and the Whites," as they put it. Fleeing to Imola, and growing desperate, Dante wrote a letter of petition asking the Florentine Blacks for pardon and the chance to return home. The humble and humiliating request would be unanswered. Lucca provided refuge for a spell, but regime change in 1309 made that city, too, uninhabitable for Dante. He continued to wander.

A year later the accession of Henry of Luxembourg to the German imperial throne, which included the title King of the Romans, filled Dante with the hope that his enemies might be discomfited and his homecoming realized: Henry VII arrived in Italy professing political healing and lasting peace. Dante had an audience with the emperor, during which the supplicant presented a letter addressed to all Italian political authorities, making "a general call for reconciliation, made possible by the sun that was appearing on the horizon," in Santagata's words. Many cities, however, jealous of their independence, nominally accepted Henry's rule at first only to flame into rebellion. When the furious Henry tore down the city walls and fortress towers of refractory Cremona in 1311, he effectively forfeited his promise of peaceful impartiality and disclosed his Ghibelline partisanship. If peaceable means would not do, war was called for, and in 1312 Henry was on the verge of securing dominion over the Italian peninsula. But with his sudden illness and death in August 1313, the imperial forces dissolved.

Dante refused to give up hope. He likely attended the imperial funeral in Pisa, and there began writing, in Latin, Monarchy, a philosophical and historical justification for universal empire, the only form of government capable of establishing world peace—after the ancient Roman example, whose righteous non-violent subjugation of all peoples was the work of Divine Providence, and was officially endorsed by Christ when he chose to be born under its imperial dominion. Popes with mistaken notions of their superior authority were put on notice. They returned the favor. Dante's theological-political treatise was ritually burned in 1329; would be placed on the Church's Index of Prohibited Books two centuries later in 1554, five years before it was first published in the Reform movement stronghold of Basel; and it would remain under ban until 1881.

Verona, and the court of Cangrande della Scala, by then a Ghibelline redoubt, would be the exile's next stopping place, and the small Guelph city of Ravenna, where he lived from 1319, his final resting place. 'In none of Dante's other places of exile did he enjoy the calm and serenity that he found in Ravenna,' writes Santagata. His children and probably his wife joined him there. Men of letters who revered his mastery formed a literary court around him. Yet he continued to hope that his masterpiece, begun in 1308 and completed in 1320, would earn him the poetic crown in Florence. He dreamed of return, on his own terms, as the city's conquering hero. It never happened. On an embassy from Ravenna to Venice he fell ill, perhaps with malaria, and died in September 1321. Guido Novello, lord of Ravenna, honored him with a solemn funeral, but his plans for a magnificent sepulcher were foiled when a usurper seized power and sent Guido into exile. Dante's humble tomb remains in that city.

**Sufferings**

Few great artists have known the world as widely and as deeply as Dante—especially in its abundance of tribulation, which probed him with some of its most penetrating agonies. Even fewer great artists have had such experience of political matters as he; and the afterlife as he depicts it never forgets the political broils that afflict and scar the mortal world, and that cause so much of the unnecessary suffering men visit upon themselves, in this life and the next. Passions for domination, for self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement, for the sensual pleasures and perversions that tyranny gluts itself with, for the power over life and death that rightfully belongs to God alone, for glory and distinction—these are the most burning human desires, and they tend to breed monstrosity that must be paid for in perpetual pain, though at their best, in which the longing for honor is conjoined with the concern for justice and kingly wisdom, they may earn one a place among the blessed. And supposedly holy men who ought to be spiritually superior to mere kings and princes are in fact consumed by the same cravings as the unabashedly political animals; the lust for power and riches on the part of popes such as Boniface VIII, who had backed the Black Guelph open warfare, inspire Dante's most venomous enmity.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely, in various ways. Among the royal contingent of the lustful whirl of Semiramis, the queen of Assyria who legalized incest so she could consort with her son; Dido, the queen of Carthage who killed herself for love of Aeneas, that wandering man who had to move on in order to found Rome; and Cleopatra, the queen of Egypt who took to her bed masters of the known world Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. The wrathful naturally number many potentates among their ranks, as Virgil scornfully tells Dante:

> "How many now above who think themselves great kings will lie here in the mud, like swine, leaving behind nothing but ill repute!"

The most iniquitous lords of men, the heartless tyrants "who took to blood and plunder," are sunk to their eyebrows in the boiling blood of the river Phlegethon: Alexander the Great is there and Dionysius of Syracuse.

Dante's political mentor, Brunetto Latini, damned for sodomy, so eloquently disarms his prized student that Dante is beguiled by his charm. It is plain that the poet still reveres his intellectual master, whom he addresses as "Ser Brunetto," an appellation at once honorific and intimate. Brunetto flatters his protégé with the prospect of literary glory: "By following your star / you cannot fail to reach a glorious port." And Dante honors Brunetto as a dear and good father: "You taught me how man makes himself immortal." The dramatic irony here is patent: there is immortality and there is immortality. Literary fame may last for many years, even for centuries, and in this sense Dante is an immortal poet and Brunetto is immortalized in his poem. But the soul is genuinely immortal as earthly fame is not, and for his sin Brunetto shall run on scorching sand dodging fireballs forever, while Dante will learn from the sight of the damned and change his life in time to gain heaven. The exchange between master and pupil is perhaps the most poignant in the poem, and one pities both the noble Brunetto and the devoted student who learned so much from him. But the hard truth remains that Latin's entire life is placed in the balance and found wanting. Whatever intellectual and moral beauties his life might have embodied, his divinely appointed end is in the worst place in creation.

Some of the noblest people are among the damned. Perhaps the hardest piece of heavenly justice to swallow is that those who lived

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before the time of Christ, including men and women of sterling virtue—Plato, Aristotle, and Virgil included—although not subject to graphic torments, live forever apart from the presence of God in Limbo, a sort of elysian antechamber to Hell.

God accepts the repentant sinner into paradise, as the father prepares a banquet for the prodigal son returned. Passage through purgatory, however, is generally required first. The souls in purgatory suffer intensely yet joyously, for they always have a purpose and a promise in mind: they know they are saved, though heavenly bliss may come only after years, sometimes hundreds of years, of ordeal. The crucial difference between the penitent and the damned is one of mind. The damned have lost “il ben dell’intelletto,” the good of the intellect, and cannot truly comprehend the divinely ordained reason for their torment. Cursing God and their parents for having given them life, deflecting blame for their sin onto every available scapegoat, refusing responsibility, the lost fail to appreciate that their situation is purely of their own making. On the mountain of purgatory it is reason that searches the souls of the suffering and allows them to see into the wrongs of their earthly life and to understand why and how they must be made good. Dante describes purgatory as “[il] monte ove ragion ne fruga,” the mountain where reason searches them. The customarily superb Hollanders misleadingly translate the phrase, “the mountain / where Justice tries our souls.” Divine reason is incommensurate with human reason—Virgil avers, “Foolish is he who hopes that with our reason / we can trace the infinite path / taken by one Substance in three persons!”—but in purgatory human reason is abetted by divine, and souls know themselves more profoundly than they did on earth. Justice tries souls that are ready for every trial because their enhanced reason has undertaken an exhaustive spiritual inventory and tells them exactly what they deserve.

As in Hell, the guiding principle of purgatorial suffering is the contrapasso, or counter-passion. In brief, the punishments fit the crimes: countervailing virtues train away the seven deadly sins. The proud bend double under the crushing weight of huge stones. The envious wear beggars’ haircloth and have their eyes stitched shut. The wrathful trudge through a pall of smoke blacker than the darkness of Hell. The slothful run everywhere. The avaricious grovel in the dust. The gluttons starve. The lustful do penance in cleansing fire. And with the power of supernatural art, spectacular sculptures and voiceovers remind the penitent of historic and legendary examples of vice and virtue. The Purgatorio is the canticle richest with love of this earthly life; however, the souls who entreat Dante to remember them to the living do so not in order to try to improve themselves in mortal eyes, as the damned do, but rather to ask for the prayers of those who love them, which speed their way up the mountain.

**Purgatory is hard but pregnant with ecstasy; paradise is flawless bliss.**

There are degrees of perfection in heaven, if one may say so, but every soul there is utterly happy with its place in the celestial hierarchy: to do God’s will is all everyone wants. Beatrice introduces Dante to the nec plus ultra of

> “the Heaven of pure light, light intellectual, full of love, love of true good, full of joy, joy that surpasses every sweetness.”

Heaven abounds with light outshining light, dazzling as it illuminates, and manifesting intellectual power at its highest reach. Mystery remains, however, and is accepted as

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**Sacred Cows, Holy Wars**

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Kenneth Lasson, University of Baltimore School of Law


> All religions have their sacred cows and holy wars. None are more colorful or intriguing than what goes on in the burgeoning world of kosher food supervision. This book tells a colorful tale of religion, politics, and filthy lucre to present a spellbinding picture of canons and curiosities as well as a sobering examination of the limitations of law, the vagaries of religious disputes, and the veeriness of business ethics. From intrigues in the abattoirs to brawls in the boardrooms and shenanigans in the supermarkets, this is a compelling chronicle that should be of interest to readers regardless of their faiths or food preferences.

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**Communicators-in-Chief**

_Lessons in Persuasion from Five Eloquent American Presidents_

Julie Oseid, University of St. Thomas School of Law


> This book examines why Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses Grant, and Teddy Roosevelt—though vastly different—were so persuasive. Thomas Jefferson used metaphor effectively; James Madison wrote with a rigor that helped him develop some of our significant political theories; Abraham Lincoln’s brevity swayed his audiences; Ulysses Grant’s clarity made him an astonishingly effective writer; and Teddy Roosevelt combined his energy and strength of conviction to move his audiences. Each featured president had some natural writing talent, but each also worked hard to hone his writing. The book provides examples of each president’s writing, discusses the characteristic style of each, lists each president’s favorite books; and shows how the presidents influenced each other’s writing styles.
the truth that God alone will ever understand: Dante asks the monastic contemplative Peter Damian why that saint, and by implication everyone, has been foreordained for his particular appointed station, and holy wisdom replies that no creature can tell him that:

“the most enlightened soul in Heaven, the seraph who fixes most his eye on God, could not produce an answer to your question, for what you ask is hidden in the depths of the abyss of God’s eternal law, so that the sight of any being He created is cut off from it.”

Dante draws the living water of his understanding from the deep well of Thomas Aquinas, who speaks at length in the poem, and he goes on there to say that even for mortals, the word that the Hollanders translate as _envioidus_, which derives etymologically from the unseen or the undemonstrable, as the Yale scholar Giuseppe Mazzotta notes in _Reading Dante_ (2013). And Siger of Brabant, who like Aquinas taught at the University of Paris, and who evidently demonstrated the undemonstrable, earned a lashing from Thomas in _De unitate intellectus contra Averroistas_, or _On the Unity of the Intellect against Averroists_. Thus Dante places the epitome of orthodoxy, and the scholar he and the Church accused of dire heresy, together in paradise.

Being a devotee of the Muslim philosopher Averroes ought to place a thinker such as Siger in a heretic’s tomb in Hell. Averroism was among the direst of heresies, founded on the idea of the Possible Intellect, shared by all humanity, allowing us all to think the identical thought when we think a rational truth, such as a mathematical fact. As Paul Cantor has elucidated in “The Uncanonical Dante: _The Divine Comedy and Islamic Philosophy_ (Philosophy and Literature, Volume 20, Number 1, April 1996),” Thus Averroes could say in effect that our souls are eternal by virtue of apprehending eternal truths such as those of mathematics. In short, Averroes’s conception of the Possible Intellect allowed him to speak of the immortality of the human soul without implying the survival of the individual soul after death.”

Schism, office-selling, and warfare against fellow Christians leave Peter enraged

“that the keys entrusted to my keeping should become devices on the standards borne in battles waged against the baptized.”

For Dante, not even the heights of Heaven mollify his old hatred. Boniface’s war-making was the ultimate force behind his exile, Dante believes, and in the heart of spiritual perfection the pope’s stench infects the poet’s mind.

“The Divine Comedy is one of the great works of humanity, but it is good to remember that this extraordinary poet never transcended the sharply circumscribed thought and feeling of human nature. Dante’s is an unforgettable poem, but before you go changing your life on its authority, you should recall that the most reliable authority on the afterlife you will ever have is yourself. You have to go there to know what it is. No one else’s word is enough.”

Algis Valiunas is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and a contributing editor of the New Atlantis.
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