

CHAPTER 2

Dante (1256–1321)

Even if Dante's work involves a fair amount of autobiographical material and occasionally fashions itself as a record of personal experiences, his writings reveal surprisingly few facts about his life. With one exception though: Dante's banishment from Florence, which first occurred in January 1302 and soon escalated into permanent exile. As the first excerpt from *Paradiso* shows, it is a testament to the callous expediency with which Dante's enemies took him out of the Florentine political equation that the whole proceeding (criminal conviction and first proscription) was carried out while Dante was on a diplomatic mission to Rome, precisely where his fate – and the fate of other prominent White Guelfs, his political associates within the local pro-papal faction – had been decided ahead of his embassy.

As the second excerpt from *Convivio* also shows, exile marked something of a turning point in Dante's life, a defining moment which he came to embrace both as a man and as a writer. First and foremost, it meant leaving behind everything he held dear, living thereafter in bitter need: blame, hardship and humiliation being then and always the outcast's lot. More to the point, the death warrant, confiscation of property and loss of citizenship which were repeatedly forced upon him (and, eventually, when they came of age, upon his sons) not only crushed whatever hope he had of setting foot in Florence again, but ultimately shaped his mature views on the civil unrest and periodic bloodshed that had plagued Italy's recent history. How to redeem the country from the evils partisan politics had brought upon the Italian peoples became Dante's first concern and constant preoccupation. While the solution he advocated was by no means original and – politically speaking – as much a thing of the past as the Sicilian vernacular that had risen to prominence with Frederic II and Manfred, his answers to Italy's past and current predicaments were rooted in a line of argument whose philosophical breadth, formal rigour and overall coherence were, if not unparalleled, then at least second to none and – philosophically speaking – more compelling than most.

Excerpts from *Monarchia* present us with Dante's plea for peace, the cornerstone of his philosophy of man. The path that leads to peace and the means to maintain and eventually restore it are the keys to Dante's understanding not only of the purpose of authority throughout history but also – and more fundamentally – of man's true nature and destination as a rational being. According to *Monarchia*, peace is the ultimate goal of human society and – by the same token – the very reason why men associate in the first place. Should they live together as one family instead of seeking after goods that benefit some and harm others, then humanity, free from conflict and oppression, would achieve its full potential, which Dante identified with its intellectual progress, intelligence being what sets man apart from every other worldly creature.

Since the core tenets of Dante's thought revolve around the idea that, in order to reach perfection, humanity must be at peace and, in order to be at peace, humanity must be ruled by a single unified authority, it does not come as a surprise that Dante rejected everything that stood in the way of a universal monarchy, be it the greed of clergymen who turned the Church of Christ into a harlot and let the French kings seize her and hold her captive, the short-sightedness of his fellow citizens eager to fight each other as soon as they ran out of external enemies, the cruelty of the warlords who held sway in the North of the peninsula or the pettiness of the German princelings undeserving of their seat on the imperial throne and unable to fulfil their imperial mission. As a result, one would be hard-pressed to find a more staunch supporter of the separation between secular power and temporal government, on the one side, and pastoral care and religious authority, on the other. It would be equally hard to find a more sturdy advocate of the supremacy of the emperor over and against all kinds of local, regional or national jurisdictions.

On the other hand, it might come as a surprise that of all the worthy men whose example prompted Dante to expose his contemporaries' failures and shortcomings, the one who definitely stands out is Manente degli Uberti (known as Farinata), a damned soul Dante meets on his journey through the Underworld. Though it is no accident that Farinata burns in Hell, his demeanour and everything he says in the *Inferno* speak volumes about Dante's political anthropology. As an Epicurean heretic, Farinata may very well feel nothing but contempt for divine justice and retribution; likewise, as a Ghibelline chieftain, he may very well display an unyielding attachment to his party and lineage. That being said, his character possesses – along with honour, courtesy and valour – one redeeming quality, namely an uncompromising love for his homeland which he refused to identify with himself, his power base or his legacy. Whatever Dante deemed that Farinata's ultimate destiny ought to be, he depicted him as a man who – when it mattered most – raised himself above partisan passions and saved the City being torn apart at the hands of his allies who were more than willing to rip their enemies' cause out, root and stem. Even though – in the

aftermath of the victory at Montaperti (1260) – strength and right were on his side, Farinata refused to deal a mortal blow to those who had cast him out and chose to share his homeland with them rather than making certain that it would never be theirs again. As the dialogue between Dante and Farinata unfolds, it becomes clear that there's no love lost between them. It also becomes clear that what drives both – the very thing Dante cherished above all and that Farinata lost but managed, almost single-handedly, to pass on to the next generation – is a dream of peace, the only hope men ever had of making a broken community whole again.

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