Between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines

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- *Dante: The Story of His Life* by Marco Santagata, translated by Richard Dixon
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Put real people in a work of fiction these days and you immediately face libel and privacy issues. The publishers will demand a legal report; every correspondence between your story and reality will be scrutinised. It won't be enough simply to change names or avoid unpleasant aspersions; the mere idea that someone might recognise themselves and feel aggrieved will set alarm bells ringing and have editors demanding revisions. How would Dante's *Divine Comedy* have fared in an environment like this? Large numbers of his fellow citizens are named and shamed. It's true that most of them were dead, but by no means all. Two living characters are pronounced so evil that the devil has carried their souls off to hell leaving demons in their bodies to perpetuate a zombie life up above. Others are declared by the damned to be 'expected shortly'.

Add to this that Dante places the prophet Muhammad in hell, launches violent insults against various cities and political and religious groupings, in many cases evidently motivated by personal resentment or self-interest, and it's hard to imagine that *The Divine Comedy* would be an easy book to publish today. Reading Marco Santagata's fascinating new biography, the reader is soon forced to acknowledge that one of the cornerstones of Western literature, a poem considered sublime and universal, is the product of vicious factionalism and packed with local scandal, much of it deployed in the hope of accruing benefits to the author.

Aside from his published writings, 11 surviving letters, a scattering of official records and one or two brief personal testimonies, we have so little information about the life of Dante Alighieri that Santagata is obliged to proceed deductively and speculatively, counterpointing the history of Florence and Italy in Dante's lifetime (1265-1320) with references and allusions in *The Divine Comedy* and Dante's other works. What we know about Dante we know largely because he was embroiled in public life and because his writing always took a position on the political situation of the moment. What makes the going hard is how complicated the politics were, how much they depended on an intricate network of family relationships, and how ambiguous and mobile Dante's loyalties were within the general mayhem. The payoff for keeping track of all this comes when we finally set aside the biography and reread the *Commedia*, and find it at once more urgent and more beautiful than we remembered.

Santagata tells us about the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, two parties with competing claims to the allegiance of Italy's numerous feudal lords and city states in the 13th and 14th centuries. The Guelfs, the church party, dominated where people felt they had more to fear from the German-based emperor than from the Roman pope. It was the party of the nouveaux riches, the bankers and traders, anyone who had an interest in the formation of a looser, less rigidly controlled society. The Ghibellines, siding with the Holy Roman Empire, were largely made up of those who had an investment in the hierarchical structures of feudalism, or simply felt themselves uncomfortably close to a papal state bent on territorial expansion.

This is perhaps too neat. Any party or grouping was as much tribal as ideological. Families, corporations, even whole cities tended to show their allegiance collectively. If a large city was Guelf, the smaller cities around it were likely to be Ghibelline, implicitly appealing for protection from afar. And vice versa. Neither party had a stable hold on people's identity. Divisions over commercial, religious and family issues were always on the cards. When decades of conflict between Guelfs and Ghibellines in Florence finally came to an end in 1289 (when Dante was 24), with the defeat and mass expulsion of the Ghibellines, the victorious Guelfs, now in complete control of one of Europe's most populous and wealthy cities, lost little time in dividing themselves into Black Guelfs and White Guelfs, who would then fight each other with the

same intensity and ferocity as they had previously fought the Ghibellines. Santagata's account of how this schism came about and how the terms 'black' and 'white' (with no more content or significance, as it turns out, than the letters a or b, x or y) were borrowed from a similar schism in Pistoia – a town which, precisely in order to overcome the impasse caused by internal division, had taken the drastic course of handing over control of its affairs to Florence – requires maximum attention on the part of the reader. But it's worth the effort. Factionalism spread like a virus and Dante wasn't immune.

These conflicts were unspeakably cruel. Enemies were imprisoned and tortured. If they were exiled, their property was confiscated, their houses, even in the centre of town, razed to the ground. Tongues were cut out and hands amputated. People were left in dungeons to starve, or disembowelled and dragged through the streets, or burned at the stake in front of jeering crowds. Imaginative though Dante's infernal punishments may be, the spirit behind them was familiar. It would be hard to miss the continuity between history and the *Inferno*.
What was Dante's position in all this? The third child of a mother who died when he was very young, he belonged to neither the old landed elite nor the successful new commercial community. Of the two, although his father was a small-time moneylender, he tended to favour the former. Always innovative and forward-looking when it came to writing and art, convinced that language and culture must be on the move, he was generally conservative on questions of society and government.

The Alighieri family was Guelf by tradition, but obscure enough to have avoided exile with other Guelfs when the Ghibellines were in the ascendant shortly before Dante's birth. Of his education we know only that his family wasn't rich enough to provide him with a private tutor. Dante's father died when his son was ten, leaving him, as Leonardo Bruni would put it, 'not greatly rich … but with moderate and sufficient wealth to live honourably'. The problem, as Santagata construes it, was that Dante's notions of honourable living were not Bruni's. He was ambitious, had the highest possible opinion of himself and aspired to the life of a noble, or at least to a noble life, a life dedicated to writing. Which brings us to one of the core themes of this biography: Dante's self-image, the way it dominated his writings and conditioned his every move.

Giovanni Villani, almost the only person to write about Dante who actually knew him, thought him a 'great poet and philosopher' but 'presumptuous, contemptuous and disdainful' as a person. A generation later, Boccaccio, whose biography of Dante is based on conversations with people who had known him, describes him as 'proud and disdainful' and prone to losing his temper. Around these meagre testimonies, Santagata gathers a quantity of detail, largely drawn from Dante's writing, to suggest a man intent on constructing a myth of himself as both nobly born and destined to greatness. All three of his major works, the *Vita nova* (1295), the *Convivio* (1307) and the *Commedia* (1321), were, for their time, remarkably autobiographical. 'Dante seems incapable of imagining a book in which his person, or at least a person bearing his name, doesn't play a significant role,' Santagata writes. However, the Dante on the page is subtly transformed from the Dante seeking to overcome the limitations of a modest background.

There's no hint of criticism here. Santagata isn't arguing that Dante is a lesser poet than we thought, or in any way disreputable. But he's not in the business of hagiography. His consideration of the Beatrice narrative is typical. Dante first presents the story in elaborate form in his late twenties in the *Vita nova*, which gathers together his poems of the previous years, linking them with an autobiographical prose narrative. The ideas of the so-called *dolce stil nova*, the 'sweet new style' of writing that had recently introduced elements of religious reflection into courtly love poetry, were thus tied to his personal development. This in itself was a remarkable innovation. Dante describes an early encounter with Beatrice when he was nine years old; he falls in love and remains faithful and devoted to her until their next meeting a full nine years later. At this encounter she acknowledges his presence, though no word passes between them. The fact, well known to his Florentine readers, that Dante had addressed love poems to other women is explained as a deliberate attempt to draw attention away from Beatrice, who, higher born than he was, had married in her early teens. After the second meeting, his love intensifies,

but there are no further exchanges between the two, until Beatrice's early death in 1290, at 24, triggers a shift in the poet's interests from sentimental to divine love.

That the story is idealised and in a tradition of idealisation is evident. Any real relationship between the two, Santagata suggests, could only have occurred in the late 1280s, long after the two meetings described. But the way Dante hangs onto the story throughout his career, making it 'one of the classic features of his intellectual and literary biography', is unusual. The effect, Santagata insists, is always to make the real Dante appear 'someone exceptional' to whom exceptional things happen. In one poem, he speaks of having suffered a seizure at the age of nine months, on a day and hour corresponding to Beatrice's birth and foreshadowing their love. In general, the seizures he experiences on meeting his beloved go far beyond conventional accounts of romantic fainting, and, along with similar episodes elsewhere in his work, could suggest epilepsy. But rather than consider these fits a mark of the devil, the standard interpretation at the time, Dante takes them as a sign of 'a predestination decreed by a supreme power'. He had been chosen.

Various details in the *Vita nova* contribute to a false impression of his social status. 'Dante,' Santagata writes, 'refers several times to a "room" of his own where he could go alone to think, to weep, and also to sleep.' Since the Alighieri house was small and the family hardly of the aristocratic kind where a member might enjoy such a private space, this can only be 'one of the many signs of distinction by which he was seeking to hide his lowly origins'. Another, years later, would be the reconstruction in the *Paradiso*, thanks to an imagined meeting with his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, of a supposedly noble lineage for the Alighieri family.
Santagata's point is that this self-aggrandising blend of biography and fiction can't be seen separately from Dante's attempts to improve his position in Florentine society. The unusual quality and content of his writing, the decision to use the vernacular rather than Latin so that his work would be available to the greatest number of local readers (though not to the wider community of foreign scholars), would draw attention to him in Florence as somebody who could play an important part in public life. Literary ambition and social status were linked. Dante's closest friend in his twenties, Guido Cavalcanti, was both a fine poet and heir to one of the city's largest fortunes. Dante could only aspire to a relationship on equal terms 'by virtue of his personality and his genius'. Equality, however, wasn't enough for Dante: in the *Vita nova*, he suggests that Cavalcanti is his John the Baptist, which of course makes Dante 'the Messiah'.
By his mid-twenties he already had a reputation as a poet. There are indications that he had been to Bologna to use its libraries and to read philosophy; he knew Latin and had most likely studied with Brunetto Latini, an eminent rhetorician more than forty years older than him; people were beginning to invite him to write poems and letters for them. But if it was now possible to surpass Cavalcanti in verse, it was more difficult to appear the aristocrat and live the aristocratic life without a substantial income. Dante had married, or been married, upmarket, into the Donati family, but precisely because his family was relatively poor his wife, Gemma, brought only a modest dowry. The two children the couple produced had to be provided for. In 1289 Dante fought as a light horseman at the battle of Campaldino, in which the Guelfs defeated the Ghibellines. This meant he had invested a great deal of money on a horse and arms in order to be among the city's elite. In later years, some of the few official notices we have of Dante are papers associated with the substantial loans he and his half-brother were obliged to take out. In a letter to a friend Dante 'emphasised his own bravery' at the battle, 'yet his name,' Santagata points out, 'does not appear among those who were compensated for having put themselves at particular risk during the action.'

In 1295 or thereabouts, probably in order to become eligible to hold government office, Dante joined the Guild of Doctors and Apothecaries and his political career began. Five years later, in the summer of 1300, he would have the supreme honour – and as it turned out, the great misfortune – of being elected as one of the city's nine governing priors at the height of tensions between the Black and White Guelf factions. He was not a neutral figure. The Cerchi family, bankers, at the head of the White faction, had gained the upper hand over the more aristocratic Donati family, who led the Black faction, which had the support of the pope. Dante's election for a two-month stint of office suggests that he, like Cavalcanti, was

with the Cerchi, despite being married to a Donati. There was strife. Appeals from the pope on behalf of the Black Guelfs were rejected. Attempting to be, or seem, even-handed, the priors exiled and interned prominent members of both families. But shortly after Dante's term of office was over, the Cerchi exiles, who included Cavalcanti, were pardoned while the Donati exiles were not. As Cavalcanti's close friend, Dante was suspected of having instigated this unwise decision. In 1301, after the Blacks, with papal assistance, regained control of the city, Dante was among 559 Whites sentenced to death. However, like most of those who had been condemned he was already well out of the city, which he would never see again, though he would continue to write about it until his death twenty years later.

What is true nobility and what kind of community best fosters it? This is the question that runs obsessively throughout Dante's work. In the *Vita nova*, and the poems of his twenties, nobility is emphatically not an attribute of family or wealth but a matter of education and disposition. In the *Convivio*, written in his first years of exile, the nobility is assessed more positively as a class which, despite being infiltrated and corrupted by merchants and moneymen, has the duty of providing the community with a peaceful, civilised existence under the auspices of the empire. This shift in position, which now recognises the value of noble birth or, more subtly, acknowledges that God in His wisdom has contrived to concentrate noble attributes among the aristocracy, was perhaps not unconnected with the decision by the newly exiled White Guelfs, Dante included, to ally with the long exiled and aristocratic Ghibellines in the hope of recapturing Florence from the Black Guelfs. 'One of the typical features of Dante's personality, which qualifies him as an "intellectual" in the modern sense of the word,' Santagata writes, is his endless reflection on what he is doing, both as an author and as a man. The main motivations for his writing come from what he himself has seen, experienced and said; and so he relies on the *hic et nunc* … Another characteristic is that of arranging the details of an experience into a theoretical or conceptual framework that explains them, and thus of rising to higher levels of generalisation.
In short, there's an urgent back and forth between Dante's personal predicament as an impoverished exile and his reflections on the nature of human society, with an inevitable tension between what it might be convenient to say and the conclusions he has genuinely reached, not to mention his feelings of resentment towards those in Florence who had destroyed his life, and of gratitude towards the growing list of those, many of them Ghibellines, on whose charity he now depended. It was out of this troubled state of mind, Santagata sets out to show, that *The Divine Comedy* was created.

Convivio means 'banquet'. Written in the vernacular, it was an invitation to all who could read to feast together on Dante's knowledge of philosophy, itself the result of his need for consolation after Beatrice's death. In the process, Dante would demonstrate his innocence and justify a request to return to Florence. Precisely this personal element made it important that the largest possible number of Florentines be able to read what he was saying. Boldly pronouncing the vernacular equal to Latin for refinement of expression, the *Convivio* encouraged his fellow citizens to leave behind any inferiority they might feel about not being familiar with Latin. It should have been a popular move, but the poem was never finished. Dante had planned 14 books, but stopped at the fourth. Santagata suggests that the quickly moving political circumstances were largely responsible. The alliance between the White Guelfs and the Ghibellines had been defeated. A letter sent by Dante to the Florentine priors requesting pardon, and admitting his error in allying himself with the Ghibellines, had been promptly circulated among the Ghibellines and done nothing but win him their contempt, restricting even further the places where he could find safe haven. In a gloomy poem written in the last months of 1306, Dante imagines all the virtues banished from human society. Sharing their destiny, he now decides that 'the exile given me brings me honour.' It was in this spirit, oscillating between humiliating requests for pardon and defiant claims of innocence and moral superiority, that he abandoned the decorous *Convivio* and embarked on the fiercely visceral, hugely ambitious *Inferno*, where Dante the poet is special beyond the wildest imagining, a unique human being selected by divine intervention for a passage through the realm of the dead and thus empowered to pronounce with authority on the sins and virtues of the living. As a rule of thumb, the more abject Dante's circumstances, the more exceptional he appears in his poetry.

Santagata's method from here on is to map Dante's movements around Italy in relation to the characters who appear in *The Divine Comedy*, inviting us to imagine him sharing his work in progress with his various, often poorly educated protectors, each of whom would be pleased to see their enemies, or enemies' ancestors, appear in hell – or themselves praised as instruments of divine predestination. More generally, though, it's the biography's evocation of the factional world of the time and the values sustaining it that throws light on the great poem and helps us to read it with fresh awareness. Embarking on the *Inferno* around 1306, Dante dated the action in 1301, just before his exile, thus allowing the dead to foresee all that will occur in the intervening years and creating an impression of prophetic powers. The decision also has the effect of suggesting that the moment when, in the middle of life's path, the poet loses his way is not unrelated to his loss of his home, of Florence. So hell presents itself first and foremost as a place of exile. To an extraordinary degree death is annulled, in the sense that the dead are to be considered dead only insofar as they are not among the living. Otherwise, however awful their punishments, they are hardly changed. All are recognisable, in possession of their wits, perfectly able to speak. And what they want to speak about is home, which for most means Florence.
Dante meanwhile can be distinguished from the dead above all by his hope to return to the world of the living, to Florence. The power he boasts, as he meets each of the damned and asks them to tell him their story, is his ability, as a poet, to affect their reputations among their Florentine peers, a gift of greater value to them than the theological considerations underpinning divine justice. It's this that gives so many of the conversations in the *Commedia* their dreamlike quality. Always condemning the destructive consequences of factionalism when such matters are discussed, the poem as a whole upholds the values of a society where inclusion is the supreme good, and exclusion hell.

No sooner is Dante through the infernal gates than he is met by the crowds of those who failed to take sides in life, a group epitomised by the angels who refused to support either God or Lucifer in the quarrel that split the heavenly powers. Neither heaven nor hell wants these pusillanimous souls, while they envy both the blessed and the damned. Worst of all, 'the world does not permit report of them.' They are excluded and forgotten. In short, it is established that whatever mistakes Dante may have made, being an active member of a faction isn't one of them. Soon after this meeting, he's introduced to the great poets of the classical world – Homer, Horace, Ovid, Lucan – who do him the extraordinary honour of inviting him to join their 'noble school' so that he becomes 'the sixth among those high intelligences', the fifth being Virgil, the poet's guide through the underworld. Again, everything is understood in terms of inclusion and exclusion. At the other end of hell, at the bottom of the ninth circle, will be those who betrayed the trust of the groups that included them, and here, in Bocca degli Abati, who betrayed his Guelf companions in battle, we encounter someone who, unusually, doesn't want to be recognised or have his story told. Treachery is more or less the only sin that's unspeakable.

Again and again Dante opens his cantos with extended analogies likening the landscape of hell to sights and features of Italy, many of them discovered in the course of his exile and associated with it. Hell is always more extreme and terrible than anything it's compared to, but the effect is to suggest that the place of punishment isn't so different from the world we know. Similarly, if people on earth are thought of as members of competing groups, the damned are all grouped in categories according to their sins; the poem thus becomes a huge effort of sorting, or rather re-sorting, where Guelfs and Ghibellines, Whites and Blacks suddenly find themselves forced together or torn apart, depending on their individual vices.

One of the most curious allocations is that of Dante's old teacher, Brunetto Latini, condemned to the seventh circle among the sodomites. Doomed to continual movement to keep his feet from burning, his face charred by the hot cinders that drift in the air, Brunetto nevertheless greets Dante with evident pleasure, calling him 'my son' and prophesying that if he follows his star he won't fail 'to reach a glorious port'. Santagata analyses Dante's negotiations for a possible return to Florence around the time the text was written, and remarks: 'Describing himself as Brunetto's son means declaring himself as his heir – it means pointing to himself, though a banished citizen, as the true interpreter of the city's traditional Guelf values.'

The implications are many and curious: did Dante put Brunetto in hell simply because it was important to claim his political blessing as soon as possible – he couldn't wait long enough to put him in the *Paradiso* – and did he choose the sin of sodomy because it wasn't something that would damage Brunetto's reputation to the extent of making his recommendation useless? There is no record elsewhere of Brunetto's being homosexual. The bizarre quality of the scene reaches its height when Dante acknowledges that it was Brunetto who 'taught me how man makes himself immortal', where immortality presumably refers to writerly fame, rather than the miserable immortality of Brunetto's eternal punishment. In line with this, all the condemned man seems to care about as the two part company is that Dante remind people back in Florence of his writing, which Dante says he will do, granting Brunetto a last homage with the words:

After he turned back he seemed like one
who races for the green cloth on the plain
beyond Verona. And he looked more the winner
than the one who trails the field.

The tension between divine justice and mutual regard could hardly be greater. Damned, Brunetto still seems a winner. It's as if God's punishment were an unfortunate irrelevance to be borne as best one can, with the result that Brunetto's stoicism in dealing with his torment actually increases his nobility in the eyes of the reader. This is hardly conventional Christianity, though Dante always insisted on his own orthodoxy. From the background Santagata provides, our impression is that the extraordinary poetry that emerges from this blending of theological debate, contemplation of suffering and anxious self-regard is the largely unplanned consequence of special circumstances meeting remarkable genius.

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One of the reasons, Santagata suggests, why Dante says nothing about the events leading up to his exile, and is careful in the *Inferno* not to attribute blame to specific leaders of Florentine factions, is that he was still hoping that the ruling Guelfs could be persuaded to change their position in his favour. By the time he was writing the*Purgatorio*, however, those hopes were dead and once again the emperor and the old nobility are held up for our admiration. Extraordinarily, as if to gratify Dante's wishes, in 1310 the new emperor, Henry of Luxembourg, launched a military campaign in Italy to put an end to factionalism and reclaim a hegemony in the peninsula lost generations before. Dante took time out from the *Purgatorio* to write *Monarchia*, his most didactic work, which contrives to be both a profound reflection on the relation between temporal and spiritual powers and a possibly self-serving text that would sanction the end of his exile. He also visited Henry's court and addressed letters to the Florentine priors and all the political powers of Italy prophesying terrible consequences if they didn't accept the emperor's civilising and divinely appointed power. But Henry's campaign was already faltering when, in 1313, he died unexpectedly.

Dante took refuge at the Ghibelline court of Cangrande della Scala in Verona, praising the feudal lord and his family extravagantly in the *Paradiso*, only to drop all further mention of them after being invited in 1319 to enjoy the protection of the more congenial and artistically inclined court of Guido Novello da Polenta in Ravenna. Guido was himself a poet and Dante's relationship with him, Santagata says, was such that there was no need to engage in 'the shameless courtly praises lavished on Cangrande'. It was just as well, since Dante would soon be embarking on the last cantos of the*Paradiso* and it was important finally to turn his attention away from 'the little threshing floor that makes us so fierce'. That did not mean, however, that he had given up all hope of swaying minds in Florence. The simple quality of the writing might be enough on its own. This is from canto XXV:

If it ever happens that the sacred poem
to which Heaven and earth have set their hand,
making me thin for many years,
wins over the cruelty that locks me out
of the fair fold where I slept as a lamb,
foe to the wolves that make war against it;

with other voice then, with other fleece
I will return …

In 1321, with the poem finished but still unpublished, Dante paid for his host's hospitality by accepting a diplomatic mission to Venice; on his way back he fell ill and died. Guido Novello promised he would build a noble tomb for him, but almost at once Dante fell victim to the kind of conflict that had dogged him throughout his life. Guido briefly left the city, handing over control to his brother. The brother was assassinated by a cousin who exiled Guido in perpetuity. The noble tomb was never built.

Elegantly translated by Richard Dixon, Santagata's biography avoids the quarrels among critics that sometimes dominate Dante studies, relegating its references and accounts of diverging opinions to a hundred pages of useful notes. Yet a book like this obliges us to reflect on the vast distance between the meaning of a work to its author, to the readers of the time and to us now. One irony is still very present to me more than a month after reading the book: excluded from his home culture in his lifetime, Dante is absolutely at the centre of it seven hundred years on. Pathetically wrong when he supposed that his own self-important interventions might swing the course of history, he was triumphantly right when he prophesied that the vernacular would prevail over Latin and that he would be numbered among the great poets of all time. In the early 19th century, Giacomo Leopardi would remark that the factional fragmentation of Italian society was such that no Italian past or present was ever entirely honoured or dishonoured 'since there can be no honour without a shared sense of society'. Dante is the exception that proves the rule, more honoured it seems to me than any other Italian in history, perhaps because his great work so completely captures and in its way celebrates the endless divisiveness that unites Italy's present with its past.