The Myth of Dante

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Abstract

This chapter explores uses of Dante's work, name, and public figure in national and transnational discourses around Italian identity, from the fourteenth to twenty-first centuries. Beginning with self-mythologization, it notes how Dante embedded the mobility of exile and the radical vernacularity of the *Commedia*'s poetry into his own authorial representation. It next considers Dante's reception up to the sixteenth century, reviewing how artistic, biographical, and literary commemorations established his literary canonicity, while accommodating divergent and sometimes polemical responses in contributions running from the age of Giotto and Boccaccio, up to Raphael and Machiavelli. The last section moves forward several centuries to examine how minoritized or marginalized communities within modern and contemporary Italy have problematized nation-centred accounts of Dante, exploring how deportee, refugee, and exophone writing re-energizes Dante's myth to make it more collaborative and transnational in the context of changing Italian cultural identities and networks in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy*, cultural mobility, exile in literature, poetic laureation, canon formation, commemorative writing, literary reception, national identity, Italian literature.

Introduction

The myth of Dante plays an important yet complex role within the history of Italian literature. Part of its complexity lies in the fact that Dante was an accomplished self-mythologist. He fashioned compelling narratives about his own prominence as an author and the prestige of his texts which have achieved significant longevity, though their fortunes in transmission have given rise to some unexpected, contradictory, and at times troubling receptions and reframings over the centuries. Another challenge posed by the 'myth of Dante' is to interrogate what or who we identify via that single name. Does it refer to the biographical

experience of the historical Dante Alighieri, framed by his dates of birth in 1265 and death in 1321? To his authorial trajectory, encompassing works in Latin and vernacular in multiple genres? Or to the Dante encountered as a first-person protagonist *within* some of those texts, notably the *Commedia* and the *Vita nova*? Each of these facets of name or identity can be brought into discussion, and it is often difficult to tease them apart. Indeed, the idea of myth-making is antithetical to sharp distinction between them: in Italian literature and culture, the figure of Dante meets the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of a 'myth' as 'a thing or person held in awe or generally referred to with near reverential admiration on the basis of popularly repeated stories (whether real or fictitious)' ('Myth', 2b). Finally, a further element to Dante's complexity is the fact that many such stories about the reach of Italian literature in relation to culture, language, and territory emphasize his own *de*centred life and poetry. The mobility of his biography as a political exile and the vast, cosmographic scale of his major poem's narrative both mark trails through the peninsula's cultural and political histories that puzzle efforts to follow any 'diritta via' or straight path of experience or of interpretation.

The straight and the lost path are images coined by Dante. The *Commedia*'s opening words mark out the conundrum of decentred wayfinding, inviting universal audience identification with their first-person utterance:

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
> che la diritta via era smarrita. (*Inf*. I.1-3)
>
> In the middle of the pathway of this life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.

The poem's opening establishes the precarity of an authorial voice speaking of and from displacement. The disoriented protagonist moves right out of 'nostra vita', this life and this world, onto a journey through the imagined spaces of the Christian afterworld. The physical and poetic voyage traverses the underground region of hell (*Inferno*), ascends the mountain of purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and finally rises through the planets and beyond the physical cosmos to God (*Paradiso*). That pathless wood of *Inferno*'s opening is counterbalanced at the poem's end by the perfect equilibrium achieved in experiencing the divine love in which all desires both originate and conclude. The trajectory between the two is an 'altro viaggio' ('a different journey') (*Inf*. I.91), and its narrative helps found the myth of Dante as both writer and

written protagonist of the poem, simultaneously the prophet-like poet speaking with authority and the humble pilgrim voyaging into the unknown.

If the poem leads towards paradisal resolution for the *Commedia*'s protagonist, it is also easy to see that its first, threatening, topographic image may originate from the historical circumstances in which the lines were written, by a poet fresh from experiencing catastrophe in his public career. Active in the volatile political milieu of his native Florence, Dante's entry into communal politics brought him to high office but ended in 1302 with judicial condemnation on corruption charges and exile under a capital charge for his remaining lifetime. The 'selva oscura' ('dark wood') makes an apt image for such turbulent political experiences. The same circumstances inform the writer Dante's preoccupation with exploring questions of justice and moral and social order in his later literary and political works. Prompted by biographical necessity, Dante established his own self-image as a model citizen and victim of unjust political persecution. His medieval experience has provided an imaginative model across the centuries to those undergoing political persecution and exile, especially during the Risorgimento when the multiple states sited on the Italian peninsula and archipelago in Dante's lifetime coalesced slowly and often painfully into the nation-state of Italy.

Accordingly, this chapter's exploration of the myth of Dante within the Italian tradition stresses its fluidity, as a phenomenon of cultural mobility (Greenblatt; Burns and Keen). This approach aims to look beyond the stereotyped nationalistic myth, symbolized for the Ottocento and early Novecento in particular by the heroic iconography of Dante statues in the public spaces of cities such as Florence, Naples, Rome, or Trent (Barański 1-3; Fenzi). As Stefano Jossa notes, the same period's 'deliterarized' interpretations cast him 'as a political rather than as a literary icon' (31, 37-41). Dante was thus often hailed anachronistically as anticipating the nationalism of the Risorgimento, of post-Unification nation-building agendas, or even of Mussolini's fascist propaganda. Since the Second World War, links with ideas of nationhood have been modified, though by no means eliminated. With his works a fixture in Italian state education programmes and his name and image abundantly present in the streetscapes and institutions of daily life, a traditionally conceived connection between poet and nation seems likely to persist to some extent. Nonetheless, more fluid and polyvalent approaches to Dante, both within Italy and beyond, have opened space for modern audiences to uncover alternative myths of Dante from the poet's pre-national life circumstances. This Dante need be fixed neither topographically nor culturally but can afford his readerships

moments both of closeness and estrangement in encountering the medieval visions of love, power, justice, belief, and identity that transpire from his written works.[1]

The cultural mobility of Dante's myth will be considered throughout this chapter in relation to both his biography and his literary works. The discussion looks outside the much-studied phenomena of Dantism and Dantophilia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] Instead, it focuses on Dante's own works, and on engagement with the myth of Dante within Italian cultural tradition from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, and from after the Second World War. to the present day Each section of the chapter follows a different aspect of Dante's evolving myth. It opens with Dante's self-mythologization and discusses his self-representation as an exile, exploring how this shapes his account of linguistic, territorial, and cultural affinities within the Italian peninsula. Next, it reviews Trecento to Cinquecento representations of Dante as Italian literary progenitor and the debates on how, where, and in what forms to commemorate him, before the advent of modern national thought. The last section explores some modern and contemporary responses to Dante that take account of him as a canonical Italian author who nonetheless invites reflection on marginality, displacement, and cultural exchange that can re-focus Dante's *italianità* through an evolving, and increasingly transnational, twenty-first-century lens.

Dante's Self-Mythologization

Dante's historical importance to the notions of Italy and Italian literature and culture is anticipated in his own writings. Key themes that will come to relate to modern ideas of nationhood are explored by Dante in different ways through concerns that he addressed as a poet self-consciously claiming literary authority in his late Duecento and early Trecento context (Ascoli; Lummus 1-20). After his exile, an attitude of austere, nonpartisan morality made a virtue of his exclusion from practical politics (Brilli, *Firenze e il profeta*; Steinberg). Dante began to locate his authority to speak on earthly affairs in his command of poetic eloquence and his detachment from, not involvement with, administrative power. The affective resonance of his exilic losses also served his self-mythologization to contemporary and later audiences. He transformed banishment from Florence on criminal charges from a badge of shame into an indictment of his accusers' corruption. The eloquence of his self-fashioning epithets of disinterested probity would be echoed through later centuries, in the legend of his political persecution by an ungrateful homeland (Jossa; Conti).

Dante's civic and ethical self-representation after his banishment led him to claim that he had cast off parochial attachment to Florence and to declare the world his homeland (*DVE* I.vi.3). In his unfinished Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* (*DVE, On Vernacular Eloquence*, c. 1304-c.1306), Dante begins to establish identification with an 'Italian' cultural space in which his standing as poet will be recognized, without prejudice, by compatriots of a shared linguistic and literary tradition. From a stance somewhere in between nostalgic native *fiorentinità* (Florentineness) and his grandiose claim to world citizenship, he reviews the regional languages of the contemporary Italian peninsula in search of a unifying, 'illustrious' form appropriate to serious poets in every territory (*DVE* I.xi.1). The survey's geographical contours broadly match the modern nation-state's, discussing language forms from fourteen major regions (the modern state has twenty). No local language is deemed suitable for literary excellence, yet Dante does identify a supra-regional language shared throughout the peninsula: 'istud, quod totius Ytalie est, latium vulgare vocatur' ('this […], which belongs to all Italy, is called the Italian vernacular'; *DVE* I.xix.1). This omnipresent Italian tongue is not only poetically 'illustrious' but also 'aulic' and 'curial', possessing traits appropriate for use in the centralizing milieu of a royal palace's court (*aula*) and administrative apparatus (*curia*). His evaluation ends by asserting that the intellectual and moral elites are in reality already united throughout Italian territories, with potential courtiers and jurists as well as poets 'gratioso lumine rationis unit[i]' ('brought together by the gracious light of reason'; *DVE* I.xviii.5). The cities, regions, and islands surveyed constitute a physical space that is Italian not only geographically but also normatively and above all culturally and poetically.

The work that established Dante definitively as a pan-Italian icon was the *Commedia*.[3] Linguistically, it became accessible peninsula-wide not by adopting *De vulgari*'s 'illustrious' language model – selective, Latinate, and stylistically consistent – but by a wide-ranging mixture of registers and markers of style. With its poetic eloquence and compelling moral vision, the poem rapidly found audiences across Italian territories. Its fundamentally Florentine linguistic tenor was also receptive to lexical borrowings from other languages, including those of Italy's regions and cities (Tavoni, 243-44, 258-59; Cachey, 'Travelling', 425). Moreover, the *Commedia*'s three afterworld realms are packed with references to people and places from numerous Italian localities, and across peninsular history, poetry, and culture, letting readers from multiple communities recognize elements of their own native milieux within its verses.

Dante's examination roams around the contours of the peninsula and islands of modern Italy, naming the natural features of mountains, rivers, valleys, and coastlines, as well

as human centres of cities, towns, villages, castles, convents, and even individual streets and squares, in a vast and detailed mapping of Italian territories (Cachey, 'Cosmology' and 'Travelling'). Many entries in this gazetteer are based in personal familiarity. Florentine placenames and personalities abound, from early allusions in *Inferno* (for instance, Brunetto Latini's in *Inf.* XV) all the way into *Paradiso* (notably, the extraordinary concentration of topographical and dynastic names in *Par*. XV and XVI). Notes on some non-Florentine phenomena such as the description of traffic flow on Rome's bridge by the Castel Sant'Angelo (*Inf*. XVIII.28-33), shipbuilding in the Venetian Arsenal (*Inf.* XXI.7-15), or the gigantic pine-cone statue at the Vatican (*Inf*. XXXI.59), may plausibly be based on personal knowledge. However, Dante pays equally lively attention to topographies and histories of places in Italy that he probably never visited, such as the list of Apulian battlefields that opens *Inferno* XXVIII (lines 7-18), or the Sicilian landscapes and cities listed by Charles Martel in *Paradiso* VIII (lines 67-75). This toponymic mapping is an important tool in his representation of spaces linked by shared heritage – spatial, historical, cultural, linguistic – that his own writings contribute to celebrating and also extending. Dante's readers throughout the peninsula have thus always encountered his assertion that the *Commedia* speaks to them in a locally intelligible language and via close-by references, while also indicating broader commonalities across Italian territories.

In the *Commedia*, Dante's use of the toponym 'Italia' often provides invitations to look back to antiquity and scrutinize how its moral and civic heritage has been transmitted to present times. In *Purgatorio* VI, he moves between images of past Italian cohesion under Roman rule that made it the 'giardin de lo 'mperio' ('garden of the empire'), and denunciation of how contemporary political rivalries have rendered it 'diserto' ('desert'; *Purg*. VI.105). Dante's impassioned plea for a contemporary imperial ruler to restore peace and justice embeds two stark portraits of the modern, fourteenth-century territories of 'Italia'. He opens with the whole peninsula's disharmony:

> Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello,
> nave sanza nocchiere in gran tempesta,
> non donna di provincie, ma bordello! (*Purg*. VI.76-78)

> Ah, enslaved Italy, lodge of sorrows, ship without a pilot on stormy seas, no mistress of the provinces but a brothel!

The toponym's second appearance highlights the individual woes of every internal community:

> Ché le città d'Italia tutte piene
> son di tiranni, e un Marcel diventa
> ogne villan che parteggiando viene. (*Purg*. VI.124-26)
>
> For the cities of Italy are all filled with tyrants, each lowlife thinking their party spirit makes them a new Marcellus.

Finally, Dante's native Florence becomes the microcosmic embodiment of the entire peninsula's troubles, personified as a fevered patient tossing on a sickbed (*Purg*. VI.148-51). This satirical scrutiny of an atomized Italy, politically and socially fragmented at every level, strikes readers more forcefully through the invective's situational framing. This describes the Italian troubadour Sordello clasping Virgil in a spontaneous embrace, 'sol per lo dolce suon de la sua terra' ('simply at the sweet sound of his city's name'; *Purg*. VI.80), as the two poets recognize their shared birthplace in Mantua. For Dante, writing as an exile and in a passage where he offers biting critique of his hometown, the depiction of two fellow poets linked by affective local patriotism and embracing under the gaze of his fictive traveller *persona* offers a resonant image of the transhistorical and transregional commonalities that could potentially draw 'le città d'Italia' together.

A different portrait of the poet's relationship to Florence appears in another episode fundamental to Dante's self-mythologizing as an unjustly persecuted exile. In an extended passage at the centre of *Paradiso* (canti XV-XVII), the traveller encounters the spirit of his ancestor Cacciaguida, a twelfth-century crusader. Cacciaguida portrays the Florence of his times as a 'dolce ostello' ('sweet lodging'; *Par*. XV.132), the antithesis of *Purgatorio*'s modern Italy, 'di dolore ostello' ('lodge of sorrows'; *Purg*. VI.76). The idealized portrait of the material and moral probity of Cacciaguida's bygone age maximizes satirical contrast with the 'puzzo' ('stink') (*Par*. XVI.55) of the fatally fragmented community of his great-great-grandson's times. *Paradiso* XVI is dedicated to forensic analysis of the glorious civic record of Cacciaguida's contemporaries and the shameful conduct of Dante's peers. Canto XVII then focuses on Dante's personal vicissitudes, presented as a prophecy of future events. Dante the poet places a poignant reflection on his lived experience of exile into Cacciaguida's mouth:

Tu lascerai ogne cosa diletta
più caramente; e questo è quello strale
che l'arco de lo essilio pria saetta.
Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale. (*Par*. XVII.55-60)

You will leave behind everything loved most dearly; and this is the arrow that the bow of exile shoots first. You will learn how much strangers' bread tastes of salt, and how hard a path it is to descend and mount strangers' stairs.

The lines fall within an extended denunciation of the corrupt political manoeuvres behind Dante's banishment, warning of its defamatory consequences, but these two *terzine* articulate Dante's notion of exile in simpler, more affective terms: the material deprivation of food and shelter; the shocking aggression of condemnation as fast as an arrow's shot; simply, the overwhelming loss of 'ogni cosa diletta | più caramente'.

Dante's assertion of his loyalty and unjust persecution seems directed firstly towards Florence but carries wider civic and poetic scope. The Cacciaguida episode continues by sketching Dante's future connectedness to larger, transregional horizons. Cacciaguida tells how patronal succour outside Tuscany will offer the exile '[l]o primo tuo refugio e 'l primo ostello' ('your first refuge and first lodging'; *Par*. XVII.70), and by implication anticipates a persistent pattern of exilic mobility between places, with the first refuge-point followed by others.[4] More importantly, Cacciaguida's discourse is composed to confer a sense of destiny on the way Dante's poetic vocation will be realized in the *Commedia*'s visionary narrative, written in the shared language of the whole peninsula. The exchange stresses the urgency of his message of moral and political reform, as well as its potential unpalatability to the powerful, looking well beyond Florence and Tuscany in imagining audiences for his poem.

A few canti later, Dante presents the almost impossible image of a return to Florence gained thanks to ''l poema sacro | al quale ha posto mano e cielo e terra' [the sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set their hand] (*Par*. XXV.1-2). He stakes a claim to the poetic accolade of a laurel crown, earned via the *Commedia*'s sacred but also vernacular eloquence:

con altra voce omai, con altro vello

> ritornerò poeta, e in sul fonte
> del mio battesmo prenderò ’l cappello. (*Par*. XXV.7-9)
>
> then with another voice, another fleece, I shall return as poet, and at the font of my baptism will attain the crown.

Dante’s affective bond to Florence in mother-tongue and natal citizenship resonate through the passage, yet the ‘poema sacro’ is unmistakably the product of exile and itself instrumental in establishing a territorial, linguistic, and cultural map where the laurel-worthy work finds audiences well beyond Florence. Love and loyalty to his hometown are counterbalanced by pained reflection on its collective cruelty and corruption; Florentine poetry is authorized for universal utterance and rhetorical grandeur. Whether in person or via his emblematic poem (Lummus 18, 106-8), the assertion that ‘I shall return as *poet*’ wrests authority away from Florence’s city governors in favour of the writer they have exiled, yet whose poetic talent can outshine the constraints of place and time and confer an enduring ‘vita tra coloro | che questo tempo chiameranno antico’ (‘life amongst those who will term this time ancient’; *Par*. XVII.119-20).

Renaissance Visions of Dante

Dante’s death in exile perpetuated the emphasis his own writings had already given to the significance of mobility within his authorial experience. His reception in later centuries conserved the poet’s own ambivalence concerning his Florentine origins and his experiences as an intellectual migrant within the larger peninsula. Between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, key elements of the myth of Dante that have endured to the present day began to emerge in different media, as his story passed from his own into others’ hands. The resulting commemorative cult included the establishment of an authorial iconography that has perpetuated an immediately recognizable visual image of Dante. Portraits and tomb effigies as well as biographies and funerary inscriptions will be discussed later, as part of this literal monumentalization of Dante. A lively production of new texts where Dante played protagonist in others’ fictions constitutes another memorable facet of responses to the poem and its author. At the same time, intellectual scrutiny of Dante’s poetic idiom and of the *Commedia* as a modern, vernacular poem on epic scale cast a spotlight onto Dante’s

linguistic and literary practice that, while generating substantial critique as well as acclaim, consolidated a myth of Dante as 'divine poet' and of his poem as *Divina Commedia*.[5]

An important element in his Renaissance literary canonization was the development of a consistent visual image of Dante as a person, both in verbal descriptions of the poet and in paintings, sculptures, books with author portraits, and other media (Owen; Reid). The earliest Dante 'portraits' were those where his image reputedly appears in late-medieval religious paintings. He is supposedly portrayed among the blessed in the *Last Judgement* fresco in Florence's Palazzo del Podestà, painted by Giotto or his workshop (c. 1337). Linked to an artist contemporary with Dante and cited by name in the *Commedia* (*Purg*. XI.95), the image's authenticity was asserted in early biographies such as Filippo Villani's (c. 1382-95) and Giannozzo Manetti's (1440). Other Renaissance Lives mention a now-lost painting by Taddeo Gaddi at S. Croce in Florence, where Dante supposedly appeared among the bystanders to a Franciscan miracle, in Leonardo Bruni's words, 'ritratt[o] al naturale ottimamente per dipintore perfetto del tempo suo' ('portrayed from life most excellently by a perfect artist of his own day'; *Vita di Dante*, 27). Though modern scholars sharply problematize the plausibility of exact portraiture in either image, Renaissance viewers ascribed importance to the supposedly authentic portrayal of a figure of such cultural significance (Gombrich; Didi-Huberman). These mythical likenesses influenced Dante's depiction in later artworks, such as Andrea del Castagno's frescoes of *Famous Men and Women* (1448-49), Sandro Botticelli's Dante portrait (c. 1495), or Giorgio Vasari's conversational grouping known as *Six Tuscan Poets* (1544), with Dante enthroned and laurel crowned as the central figure in a vernacular literary pantheon. Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura frescoes at the Vatican (c. 1509-11) combine both visual strands in the same room: *Parnassus* places Dante alongside Homer, Virgil, and other ancient and modern poets, as companion of the Muses; the *Triumph of the Eucharist* groups him with papal and theological defenders of Christian sacred truths. Visual iconography that could be assimilated at a glance served the emerging myth of Dante as a unique literary figure, distinctive in physical appearance as well as poetic style.

Equally important to the early myth of Dante was the rise of biographical writings that documented and commented, sometimes polemically, on key aspects of the poet's life and character (Bartuschat). Boccaccio's *Trattatello in laude di Dante* set an important model for subsequent Lives.[6] Boccaccio insisted on Dante's literary preeminence to the whole peninsula, as 'singulare splendore italico' ('unique Italian splendour'; *Trattatello*, 20). The *Trattatello* portrays his primacy in the vernacular literary landscape as equal to Homer's for

Greek poetry, and to Virgil's for Latin (*Trattatello,* 84). Indeed, the exiled poet reverses the ideological exile of poetry itself for modern audiences, since Dante 'primo doveva al ritorno delle muse, sbandite d'Italia, aprir la via' ('first re-opened a path for the Muses' return, after their exile from Italy'; *Trattatello,* 19). Boccaccio also sharply contrasts the honour shown to Dante by intellectuals and princes outside Tuscany, during the enforced mobility of his exile, with his political persecution by his native Florence.

This theme too became a keynote of Renaissance reflections on Dante. The classical *topos* of exile as world citizenship invoked by Dante himself (*DVE* I.vi.3) provided a productive means of reflecting on his legendary exceptionality. On the one hand, it provided openings for critique of Florentine civic self-aggrandizement, in light of persecution of a great native son; on the other, it also contributed to perceptions that a shared literary and linguistic patrimony could make vernacular culture increasingly peninsular and Italian, in Dante's wake (Eisner; Gilson, *Dante and Renaissance Florence* and *Reading Dante*). Boccaccio employs another classical trope to claim that his pages confer the same longevity to Dante's memory as a monumental tomb. The biographer risks ephemerality, working 'non con istatua o con egregia sepoltura […] ma con lettere povere a tanta impresa' ('not with a statue or dignified tomb but with words scarcely sufficient for such a task'), yet words have potentially greater durability as 'perpetue conservatrici della colui memoria' ('perpetual conservation of his memory'; *Trattatello,* 8, 90; Bartuschat, 51-54; Usher). The *Trattatello* indeed campaigns for repatriation of Dante's remains to enhance Florence's cultural grandeur and compensate exile's defamation. Boccaccio thus gives an early taste of a running theme in Renaissance commemorative tradition, with *fiorentinità* and exile marking the twin poles of Dante's political-poetic mythologization.

The exiled Dante's grave at Ravenna was probably originally modest, but by 1483 a full monumental tomb had been constructed, with a visual and textual programme that articulates key points in his emerging poetic legend. The monument's inscribed epitaph ventriloquizes his first-person speaking voice, ending reproachfully with 'hic claudor Dantes, propriis aiectus ab oris, | quem genuit parvi Florentia mater amoris' ('I, Dante, am enclosed here, expelled from my home's shores, born of Florence, a mother showing little love').[7] Pietro Lombardo's bas-relief profile bust of the poet, pensive at his reading desk, marks his Parnassian privilege with a crowning laurel wreath (Pincus and Comte, 736-37, 741). Both the portrait-style image (rather than a recumbent, sarcophagal full-length) and the first-person epitaph convey a sense of living personhood that demonstrates how much Dante's *Commedia*

and his poetic and historico-political reputation were matters of cultural *actualité* in Quattrocento and Cinquecento intellectual circles.

Back in Dante's Florentine birthplace, the missing physical sepulchre was compensated by painted memorials. A lost portrait tribute was first placed in the cathedral sometime in the 1420s. Descriptions record that it dramatized the dispute over the poet's tomb as a dialogue conducted on scrolls held by the author and two Florentine interlocutors alongside him in the painting, who promised reburial and a marble monument for the remains still interred in Ravenna ('anchora in marmo la farà traslata'; Jacobowitz-Efron, 79-80). This image was later replaced by the still-extant painting of Dante that Domenico di Michelino executed, significantly, at the 1465 bicentenary of the poet's birth rather than his death. A fictive inscription occupies an epitaph position below the image, but its text presents Dante as a resurgent civic presence and cultural father figure ('adest Dantes sua quem Florentia saepe | sensit […] patrem').[8] Overriding the ideological challenge of his historical banishment, it acclaims Dante's perpetual presence within his native city, with the civic, moral, poetic, and visual accolade paid in word and image on the cathedral's wall:

> Nil potuit tanto mors saeva nocere poetae
> Quem vivum virtus, carmen, imago facit.
>
> Cruel death could not harm such a poet who lives in virtue, song, and image.

As Elisa Brilli notes, Michelino's image supersedes its predecessor not merely in its material survival but also its inscriptional politics ('Image', 114-15). The previous painting ascribed Dante agency in the commemorative debate by allowing his image to speak, via the painted scrolls, if only on the topic of his burial place. Boldly, the text beneath Michelino's portrait claims him, 'vivum' ('living'), for the Florence of here and now – 'adest Dantes' ('here is Dante'), in the present tense.

Dante's cultural primacy was a point of dialogue in numerous other visual and literary spaces of Trecento to Cinquecento Italy. Sherry Roush's study of Renaissance *eidolopeia,* 'the rhetorical figure by which the dead are made to speak' (3), analyzes several case-study texts from the 1350s to 1520s in which the 'speaking spirit' of Dante becomes the protagonist in another author's work. Other literary works feature ekphrastic encounters with the portrait, statue, or monument of Dante that celebrate the imagined artwork's eternalizing function. Boccaccio, for instance, well before his biographical *Trattatello,* introduced an image of

Dante as Italy's vernacular literary *fons et origo* in his *Amorosa visione* (c. 1343). Led on a didactic tour of an allegorically decorated palace, the poem's awestruck narrator encounters a painted image:

> Costui è Dante Alighier fiorentino,
> il qual con eccellente stil vi scrisse
> il sommo ben, le pene e le gran morti:
> gloria fu delle Muse mentre visse,
> né qui rifiutan d'esser sue consorti. (*Am. Vis.* V.84-88)
>
> This is Dante Alighieri the Florentine, he who, with excellent style, for your sake described the highest good, the torments, the damnations: he was the glory of the Muses while he lived, nor here do they decline to be his consorts.

In Boccaccio's description, the painting's queenly personification of Wisdom crowns Dante with laurel among the poets of antiquity. The image absorbs the narrator's gaze so long that his guide scolds: 'Che più miri? forse credi | renderli col mirar le morte posse?' ('Why do you keep gazing? Do you think perhaps you can give him back his dead powers by staring?'; *Am. Vis.* VI.23-24).

The *Amorosa visione* thus just holds back from direct dialogue with Dante. That move is instead achieved in Giovanni Girolamo Nadal's *Leandreride* (c. 1381-82). Using the kind of *eidolopeia* that Roush discusses, this poem looks beyond the primarily Florentine tradition that she samples in making Dante a precursor of the Venetian Nadal's own regional literary tradition just as much as of the Tuscan line (Calenda 425-27). The *Leandreride* is a retelling of Ovid's myth of Hero and Leander. The phantom or spirit of Dante appears within an authorial digression, where Nadal as narrator prepares for his own poem's tragic climax by encountering the spirits of great past and present writers. Dante's spirit acts as mediator of the ancient and modern literary canon to Nadal as apprentice poet. Dante also wears the triple laurel crown otherwise exclusive to the scene's Greek and Latin writers:

> Vulgar poeta conosciuto
> i' son tra loro, nondimen tre serti,
> come al più grave, lor me han conceduto,
> perché da' lor più magni e più diserti

> iudicato fui degno de le fronde
> che non si dienno portar se non ben merti. (*Leand.* IV.II.67-72)
>
> I am known among them as a vernacular poet, nevertheless they let me wear the three crowns of the highest distinction, since by the greatest and most eloquent of them I was judged worthy of those leaves that only true merit lets one wear.

Dante's triple-crowned companions run from poets of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew antiquity up to more recent neo-Latinists, including Petrarch and Boccaccio. Duecento and Trecento vernacular poets from Tuscany, Sicily, Romagna, Emilian, and the Veneto also appear (as do Occitan troubadours), with numerous Venetian compatriots of Nadal closing the list. Finally, Dante's spirit enlists Nadal into the literary coterie and accords him a poetic wreath, albeit the lesser myrtle crown of love poetry: 'di assenso di tutta questa brigata, | di mirto il capo, qual di primo honore, | ti cerchio' ('with assent from this whole company, I crown your head with myrtle, the first poetic honour'; *Leand.* IV.IX.12-14). Nadal's activation of Dante as arbiter of vernacular authority for Italy and for Venice, and for the poem that he himself is still writing, provides insight into the poet's late-Trecento mythologization in its imagining of ancient and Romance poetic traditions converging in and through Dante.

Dialogues invoking Dante's spirit or reflecting on his legacy were by no means always as straightforward as Nadal's in paying homage to Dante or suggesting that his myth could be peacefully inserted into contemporary cultural conversations. By the Cinquecento, Dante and his poem were consistently invoked in the debates about vernacular books and their authors that were central to the *questione della lingua*, in particular over the issue of establishing a nonregional, 'Italian', standard literary language. Problematizing as much as affirming the legend of Dante's literary fatherhood, the *questione* probed issues of linguistic, rhetorical, grammatical, and lexical usage and debated whether the *Commedia* provided an appropriate imitative model for the peninsula's modern vernacular authors. Leading voices presented their arguments not only in dedicated theoretical works – the Venetian Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) probably the most famous – but also within commentaries and paratexts to editions of vernacular authors, including the many Cinquecento editions of Dante's *Commedia* and other works.[9]

A lively if eccentric contribution develops in Niccolò Machiavelli's *Discorso intorno alla nostra lingua* (c. 1524), which patriotically asserts that a Florentine linguistic foundation underpins all the best past and contemporary Italian poetry. It makes Dante something of a

straw man, portrayed as responsible both for the proof of *fiorentinità* in his practice and for a disingenuous peninsularism in theory. The attack starts from Machiavelli's account of the 'curial' language ideology of *De vulgari eloquentia*, which he and other contemporaries took to postdate the poem and assert purist prescriptions running counter to the *Commedia*'s practice (Gilson, *Reading Dante*, 72-78). Machiavelli summons Dante's spirit into the *Discorso*'s discussion, casting the analysis as a first-person dialogue between 'N.' (Niccolò) and 'D.' (Dante). Quotations from the *Commedia* flow between them, providing extended demonstration of its dominant Florentine linguistic matrix and immersion in local culture. Citing *Inferno* XIX, for instance:

> N. Dimmi di nuovo: tu di' ancora, volendo dire 'le gambe': 'et quello che piangeva con le zanche'; perché lo di' tu?
> D. Perché in Firenze si chiamono *zanche* quelle aste sopra le quali vanno gli spiritelli per Santo Giovanni, et perché allora e' l'usano per gambe, et io, volendo significare 'gambe', dissi *zanche*.
> N. Per mia fé, tu ti guardi assai bene da i vocaboli fiorentini! (*Discorso*, 42)

> N: Again, tell me: you say, meaning 'legs'[*gambe*]: "Of him that so lamented with his shanks". Why do you put it like that?
> D: Because in Florence the stilts which the 'spirits' on St John's day go about on are called *zanche*; they use them to walk on, and so I said *zanche* to signify 'legs'.
> N: By my faith, you do take good care to keep clear of Florentine expressions!

More than a dozen other words and phrases are similarly taken apart, with 'N.' finally forcing 'D.' to renounce *De vulgari*'s positions: 'Udito che Dante hebbe queste cose, le confessò vere et si partì; et io mi restai tutto contento, parendomi di haverlo sgannato' ('When Dante had listened to these remarks, he confessed that I was right, and went away. I was highly pleased to have set him right'; *Discorso*, 79). As Roush argues, Machiavelli's ironizing, partisan dramatization exploits the myth of Dante's exiled rejection of Florence in order to assert his own superior *fiorentinità* as loyal defender of civic culture, even as Machiavelli too experienced political exclusion (109-14). Yet the dialogue also asserts the *Commedia*'s peninsular ubiquity in the very vehemence that Machiavelli brings to arguing that the great contemporary writers of Ferrara, Naples, Vicenza, and Venice all use a language that is Florentine at root (*Discorso* 76, 80).

Just as Renaissance painted and sculptured monuments represented Dante more as living poet than entombed *gisant*, or Nadal imagined conversing with his spirit, Machiavelli too makes Dante a protagonist in the live conduct of contemporary linguistic and cultural polemic. From Trecento to Cinquecento, visual and textual reimaginings of Dante as author and exile recognized how his biographical mobility in banishment gave many different centres a stake in claiming proximity to a poet who could be considered as much peninsular or mythically Parnassian as Florentine (or Ravennan, or Venetian) in affiliation.

A Mobile Modern Dante

From the mid-eighteenth to mid-twentieth century, the myth of Dante and his poem continued to evolve. Reiteration of his biographical vicissitudes and acclaim of his canon-founding linguistic and literary contribution, along with increasing replication of his visual image in printed, painted, sculpted, and eventually cinematic media, disseminated the idea that Dante was a figure to whom every Italian region could find a connection. The theme of exile took on particular prominence in the movement for peninsular unification, between the late Settecento and the foundation of the Italian state in 1861 (Di Giannatale; Jossa; Conti). Authors and artists co-opted an image of Dante as an Italian *avant la lettre*, and Dante's representation as cultural *pater patriae* remained prominent in the new state's nation-building programmes up to and beyond the First World War (Querci; Fenzi). Under the Fascist Party's interwar regime, nationalist and imperialist inflections of the myth of Dante intensified, producing politicized readings of 'Dante in camicia nera' (blackshirt Dante), as Stefano Albertini puts it. Outside Italy's new territorial borders too, Dante's name, image, and works became widely diffused markers of national culture. The era's large communities of emigrants became more consciously Italian on leaving local peninsular homes, and one of the principal organs that the new state used to connect with them and promote Italian – rather than regional – linguistic and cultural identity, was indeed a network of 'Dante Alighieri Societies', capitalizing on the poet's name as national signifier (Choate 110-15, 123). At a more elite level, enthusiasm for medieval culture among Italian and Italophile intellectual circles through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth ensured Dante's place in an emerging national and transnational 'Western cultural canon'. These Ottocento and Novecento developments, reworkings, and distortions of a nation-centred 'myth of Dante' have been the subject of significant, detailed scrutiny. Rather than revisit that scholarship, this chapter's closing reflections move into the post-Second World War period, to examine some

of the approaches to Dante as pre-nation-state icon adopted in the shifting political climates of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[10] Through the first half of the twentieth century, Dante's legend was both shaped and distorted by the political and social exigencies of the First and Second World Wars and the Fascist *ventennio*.[11] Fascism's nationalist-imperialist propagandization of Dante, however, stands alongside different emphases given to Dante's banished precarity on the part of those suffering persecution for anti-Fascist resistance or under the stigmatizing doctrines that resulted finally in 1938's Racial Laws. Their commentaries on some of the period's worst crises could discover parallels in the *Commedia*'s stringent interrogation of its characters' human dilemmas and sufferings.

In Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (1947, republished 1958), the chapter titled 'Il canto di Ulisse' offers one of the most memorable episodes in the modern myth of Dante.[12] The chapter recalls the fleeting respite from the Auschwitz regime created by Primo and his companion Jean when, walking through the *Lager* to collect the soup ration, they plunge into an intense conversation about Dante and the Ulysses story from *Inferno* XXVI. For the internees, to recall Ulisse's voyage towards the horizon 'per l'alto mare aperto' ('on the open sea'; *Inf*. XXVI.100) is to think of 'dolci cose ferocemente lontane' ('sweet things ferociously far away'), to imagine 'un vincolo infranto, […] scagliare se stessi al di là di una barriera' ('a chain which has been broken, throwing oneself on the other side of a barrier'; *Se questo*, 101). When Primo quotes Ulisse's plea that 'Fatti non foste a viver come bruti | ma per seguir virtute e conoscenza' ('You were not made to live as beasts but to follow virtue and knowledge'; *Inf*. XXVI.119), he feels Jean's response intensely:

> ha ricevuto il messaggio, ha capito che lo riguarda, che riguarda tutti gli uomini in travaglio, e noi in specie; e che riguarda noi due, che osiamo ragionare di queste cose con le stanghe della zuppa sulle spalle. (*Se questo*, 102)
>
> He has received the message, he has felt that it has to do with him, that it has to do with all men who toil, and with us in particular; and that it has to do with us two, who dare to reason of these things with the poles for the soup on our shoulders.

Ulisse's sweeping, tragic voyage counterpoints the prisoners' walk, until the chapter ends with the final line of Dante's canto and the image of shipwreck: 'Infin che il mar fu sovra noi richiuso' ('until the sea had closed above our heads'; *Inf*. XXVI.142; *Se questo*, 103).

Levi's Ulysses chapter is explicitly Dantean, but *Se questo è un uomo*, with his other writings, draws extensively on expressions, images, and characters from the *Commedia*,

especially *Inferno*, to portray the *Lager*'s punitive regime and show how far it pushes its inmates outside ordinary human experience. And not Levi alone: scholars have noted how often, in records from Italian survivors of the Nazi camps, Dante's prominence in their own cultural formation lets his poem provide a recurrent sounding point for the camps' reality of ceaseless, extreme suffering (Mengoni; Pertile; Kay, 'Primo Levi'). The myth of Dante, via some of the darkest parts of his imagined afterworld, has taken on new dimensions in the wake of such testimony, and Levi's Dante has become a significant part of modern reception and representation of the medieval poet.

Shoah survivors' dialogues with Dante demonstrate the literalization of *Inferno*'s imaginings in the abuse meted out by European populations against their own minorities. Nonetheless, insidious continuities with pre-Second World War nationalist myths of Dante periodically emerge in the cultural polemics of later decades. Some commentators' visions of Italian cultural cohesion deploy stereotypes of Dante's linguistic or literary national 'fatherhood' that support politicized discourses of Italian ethnic and territorial boundedness (Kay, '"Dante e l'Italia"'). Even in less nation-centred discourses, the supposed universalism of Dante often stressed in accounts of Italian culture and literary canons generally emerges from a Western perspective – recent study of Dante translation, for instance, draws attention to his absence as much as his presence across many of the world's languages (Blakesley). Any project for discussing Dante in a comparative, transnational spirit that accepts his polyvalence and can accommodate marginality places delicate, though also absorbing charges on Dante's contemporary readerships. Notably, the myth of Dante as a displaced, exiled author has become a reference point in debates about minorities and marginalization within the Italian cultural sphere that address the new matrices of transnational mobility opening around Italy's nation-state territory from at least the 1990s.

Some of these responses arise from twenty-first-century experiences of war and persecution. Reworking Risorgimento legacies, not always comfortably, many projects aimed at supporting refugees in cross-cultural encounters with Italy employ the familiar mythology of Dante's displacement to offer points of commonality between those newly arrived and the culture of the civic society receiving them. Some projects are directed towards introducing refugees to their host culture; others, to encouraging positive responses towards the displaced on the part of Italians and of the settled Global North more generally. Several anthologies published in recent decades showcase creative responses arising from such projects. *Dante on the Move*, for instance, based on British-American university collaboration with refugees

studying and living in Rome, showcases both critical essays and visual, poetic, and performative responses to Dante. Its opening poem, 'The Canto of the Shipwreck', by Kurdish student and artist Mohammed Jamal Sedeeq, weaves the words of Dante's Charon and Ulysses into a modern people-smuggling tragedy, and closes purgatorially with an image of the artist's boat sailing from cruel sea into gentler waters (Allsopp 66-69). Ukrainian Anna Rakul parallels Virgil's departure in *Purgatorio* with migrants' prized but transitory encounters with different guides and mentors along their journeys (70-72), while Sanaz Alafzada draws on *Paradiso*'s Cacciaguida to establish an imagined dialogue with the grandmother who died after Alafzada left her homeland of Afghanistan (Allsopp 142-50). The UNHCR-sponsored anthology, *Anche Superman era un rifugiato* (*Superman was a Refugee Too*), edited by Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego, pairs Italian authors with refugee collaborators. Contributor Paolo Di Paolo's short stroy blends Afghan musician Alaa Arsheed's memory of his poet-friend Moosa alongside images from *Purgatorio* to illustrate how friendship and memory survive exile and death, under the Dantean epigraph 'Che la dolcezza ancor dentro mi suona' ('So that the sweetness still sounds within me'; Di Paolo, 26; *Purg*. II.114). As Saskia Ziolkowski notes, the tale highlights how the *Commedia*'s journey images feed a contemporary myth of Dante as both historical exile and consolatory poet (112). Yet Ziolkowski also underscores how such anthology projects potentially replicate, however unintentionally, the power dynamics of refugee victimhood in the emphasis given to the Western cultural canon and Italian language to interpret experiences belonging to the individuals they seek to welcome.

Migration experiences of a different kind inflect the Pulitzer Prize winning author Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Dante Alighieri' story in her *Racconti romani*. Lahiri's decision to transition from English to Italian authorship often presents reflections on her experiences as an American citizen with privileged, 'expat' status who is also frequently racialized in Italy for her Bengali heritage (Lahiri *In altre parole* and *Translating*).[13] In 'Dante Alighieri', the female protagonist migrates to Italy for study and later marriage, part-repeating her parents' prior migration to North America from an unspecified other continent. Flashes of engagement with myths of Dante underpin the story. In adolescence, the girl's romance with a boy who signs himself 'Dante Alighieri' must, if only she then knew it, be destined to nonfulfillment by its Dantean framing. Studying Dante's poetry at university, she writes a prize-winning essay that funds a trip to Italy, where marriage to an Italian leads away from a planned academic path. In middle age, she resumes studying and it is her refound expertise on Dante

that in fact breaks ties to Italy and to her marriage and returns her to American university life. A spatialized Dantism filters through the story: adult transitions between two continents are 'un limbo eterno' ('eternal limbo'), 'una specie di purgatorio' ('a sort of purgatory'), and Rome is both heaven and hell (216, 246). Mediating between languages, nations, and cultural canons, Lahiri's protagonist contemplates adjustments to ageing and loss 'nel mezzo del cammin' ('in the middle of life's journey'; 245). Ethnicity and identity rotate through the tale along with scattered phrases and images from the *Commedia*, but the final page presents Dantean words that could stand as epigraph not just for this tale but the *Racconti* as a whole: the *Vita nova*'s famous title phrase, cast as the central question of displacement and of the 'new life' (or lives) that it affords: 'Quante volte *incipit vita nova*?' ('How many times *incipit vita nova*?'; 249).

Lahiri's final citation of Dante takes the form of a question. As this section seeks to suggest, the interrogative mode is appropriate for reflection on the myth of Dante in the modern and contemporary period. From the Risorgimento to the Second World War, a centralizing, nationalist myth of Dante came to be articulated within cultural programmes focused on political unification. Romantic poets, Liberal intellectuals, and Fascist popular culture brought different emphases to the vision of Dante as *pater patriae* of an emerging national culture, but the theme of statehood was consistently present. Anti-Fascist resistance and Italian deportation experiences in the Shoah destabilized the nationalist equation and generated significant new debate about Dante's legacy. Nonetheless, postwar cultural politics have never fully abandoned instrumentalization of Dante, in some quarters, as an icon for Eurocentric discourse that resists and sometimes explicitly opposes the fluidities and metamorphoses of transnational cultural mobility. On the other hand, while endeavours to emphasize Dante's universality and to relate his premodern experience of exile from a medieval city-state to modern migrations or displacements may risk over-simplification, they can also generate productive new life for the evolving myth – or myths – of Dante.

In closing, it is worthwhile to return to the themes of mobility and the interrogation of cross-regional or cross-cultural cartographies characterizing each period discussed in this chapter. Dante's *Commedia* portrays its protagonist as perpetually on the move, travelling through new territories in the afterworld, and figuring its own vernacular poetry as a boat venturing into unknown waters (*Purg*. I.1-6; *Par*. II.1-18). The first-person narration that makes the poetic journey so compelling has always permitted readers a degree of conflation between Dante as protagonist of the poem and Dante as its author. The range of his other

writings and the vicissitudes of his biography open further avenues for the creation of myths about Dante. These have followed different itineraries, accumulating changing intellectual and material investments over the course of their circulation. The persuasive narratives that Dante launched about his own identity have crystallized around two consistent points of reference: his exile and his assertions of poetic exceptionality. An apt ending for this brief discussion of the myth of Dante might be to recall Michelino's painted effigy in the exiled poet's Florentine birthplace. This image of Dante is one of the most widely reproduced in the modern era. It both monumentalizes Dante as a fixed cultural icon yet also portrays him in a decentred stance *outside* his city's boundary walls. The accompanying inscription stresses his ceaseless, evolving contemporaneity: 'quem vivum virtus, carmen, imago facit'. The multifaceted myth of Dante is indeed 'made alive' ('vivum facit') in enduring curiosities about his character ('virtus'), his image ('imago'), and above all, his poem ('carmen').

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[1] On Ottocento and Novecento politicized readings of Dante see, besides Jossa, also Noakes; Yousefzadeh; Kay, 'Transnational Turn' and 'Dante e l'Italia'; Kumar; Conti.
[2] See especially Conti; Audeh and Haveley.
[3] See Jennifer Rushworth's chapter in this volume.
[4] The reference is to the Scaligeri court at Verona, where Dante probably stayed at least twice in exile, c. 1304 and c. 1312/13. On this and other exile residences, see Brilli and Milani.
[5] Both uses of 'divine' are attested early. Dante is 'poeta divinus' in Benvenuto da Imola's commentary to the *Commedia* (c. 1475/80). Boccaccio's *Trattatello* (c. 1351/55) speaks of 'la divina *Comedia*' (Redaction 1, 185): Gilson, '"La divinità di Dante"', 581-82.
[6] The first redaction was composed c. 1351/55, a second c. 1362. All following quotations are from the first, longer text.
[7] Complete text: Rinaldi, 427-431. The epitaph, attributed either to Rinaldo Cavalchini or Bernardo Scannabecchi, was probably added to the original tomb between 1362 and 1374, before being re-inscribed onto the 1483 monument.
[8] Complete text: Rinaldi, 468-69. The epitaph is attributed to Bartolomeo Scala.
[9] See Gilson, *Reading Dante*, and the chapters by Brian Richardson and Bernhard Huss in this Handbook.
[10] See Kay, 'Transnational' and '"Dante e l'Italia"', Coggeshall, Kumar, Webb; also Charles Burdett and Loredana Polezzi's chapter in this volume.
[11] See Guido Bonsaver's chapter in this Handbook.
[12] See Niccolò Scaffai's chapter in this Handbook.
[13] See the chapters by Alberica Bazzoni and Burdett and Polezzi in this Handbook.