

## Exile Literature: Betwixt and Between Body and Spirit

“Exilium ibi esse puta, ubi virtuti non sit locus”  
(Cicero, *Pro Milone* 101)

“Nulla terra exilium est, sed altera patria est”  
(Seneca, *De remediis fortunae* 8.1)

On January 27, 1302, Dante Alighieri was expelled from the city of Florence in which he was born and which he was destined to make famous more than any other Florentine. Shortly afterward, on March 10, 1302, he was also condemned to death by the new government of his native city. The year 2002, therefore, marks the seventh centenary of what Italy's most famous exile viewed as “pena d'essilio e di povertate” (*Convivio* 1:3.3). We do not know what Dante's literary career would have been without the forced exile he experienced until the end of his life; we know, however, that his exilic condition, which he always judged totally unjust and undeserved and which he suffered in the noblest manner, deeply affected all the works he wrote afterward. At the same time, that life of forced wanderings made him also realize most deeply the Christian believer's condition of exile on earth and pilgrimage toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

Most obviously, the experience of exile is unique neither to Dante alone nor to Italians as a people. And yet, the Italian peninsula's political fragmentation until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dictatorship that the newly formed country experienced for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's second quarter, and finally Italy's participation in the Second World War, caused many Italians (just as countless other people all over the world) to experience exile because of political, religious, and economic reasons. Removed to a new land, the exiled person is time and again viewed as, or even turns into, a stranger, a foreigner, an alien.<sup>1</sup>

Physical removal or absence from one's country, however, invariably creates a peculiar inner condition in all exiles, who may live this imposed physical removal or absence in as many different ways as the different circumstances of their physical removal, the conditions of their host country, and the personal and subjective reactions to their new ways of life may be. Being an exile, therefore, always entails a deeply felt inner condition; in fact, it is precisely this deeply and continuously felt awareness of the original, forced or

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<sup>1</sup> Stranger: < Lat. *extraneus* 'outward,' < *extra* 'outside'; foreigner: < late Lat. *foranus* 'outsider,' < *foras* 'outside'; alien: < Lat. *alienus*, < *alius* 'other.' The word “exile” (It. *esule*) has an uncertain etymology: Lat. *exsul* < *ex* and *solum* 'soil, land': chased away from one's land. For further comments on these and related terms, including the notion of otherness, see Monga 33-37.

*Annali d'italianistica* 20 (2002)

self-imposed moving away from one's country that invariably constitutes the exiled person's *raison d'être*.

Being in exile according to the strict sense of the word, therefore, affects not only the body but necessarily also the spirit of all those who undergo it. In fact, the exile of the spirit may affect also many of those who, still living in their own country, suffer because of countless forms of spiritual, mental, or emotional alienation and estrangement. In brief, the exilic experience lies betwixt and between body and spirit, space and symbol; and as such, every one may experience it, as all of this volume's essays attest.

Consequently, precisely because the exilic experience affects the human spirit, it also becomes, time and again, a fertile ground for countless written documents belonging to virtually all literary genres, as this volume documents: autobiography (**De Marco; Bietolini**); poetry in all its forms (**Wilson; Raffa; Keen; Alfie; Peterson; Rushing; Camps; Burns; Wright**); religious writings (**Maggi**); travel literature (**Monga**); translation and literary studies (**Gaudenzi**); fine arts (**Audeh**); autobiographical and philosophical writings (**Campa**); novel (**Tosi; Kroha; Santini Blum; Rorato; Gola**); film (**Lombardi**). Whether the exile is physical or existential, spiritual or intellectual, what concerns the scholar in this context is the written document left behind by either the person who lives this exilic condition or by someone else who has witnessed that person's life. Thus, the title of this twentieth issue of *Annali d'italianistica*, "Exile Literature," may appropriately be used to encompass all such written documents that deal with exile in all its manifestations, diachronically spanning all centuries of Italy's literary culture, and painfully documenting the individual exile's experience, which is as diverse as the people subjected to it. In fact, the volume's twenty-three essays devoted to exile literature evince a fundamental truth: humankind seems to bear within itself the exilic seed, which may grow into the tree of physical exile, or the tree of religious, spiritual, intellectual, and existential exile, or finally a grafted tree bearing the fruits of both previous ones, betwixt and between body and soul, space and symbol. As if it were a gene in each of us, exile seems to allow no one to escape it. What counts first and foremost, therefore, is the way each individual lives exile. Situated virtually at the beginning of Italy's literary culture, Dante Alighieri's exilic experience has always been, and still is, a model worthy of our attention and imitation.

Insofar as exile constitutes a painful human experience, religiously and/or anthropologically harkening back to Adam's and Eve's expulsion from Eden, another kind of exile, hardly ever documented and described, should be borne in mind. All the written documents broadly defined as exile literature, in fact, allude to, but do not describe, the exilic experience of the Other; namely, *the exilic experience of the countless people who have lived and suffered it in silence*. The largest majority of people, in fact, suffered exile, betwixt body and spirit, without ever being able to write about it. This volume intends to commemorate this silent exile as well.

It should not go unnoticed, in fact, that the exilic condition that typically concerns the scholar is that of an adult male of considerable education, wealth, or political influence. Next to him, but more often left behind, are all those — and they are the majority — who remained silent: patient wives, innocent children, bereaved relatives and friends, and the throngs of faceless exiles and refugees, crisscrossing plains, mountains, deserts, and even oceans of all continents from time immemorial to the present day. Although the silent exiles' history cannot be written, this volume should also be read as a document to their unspeakable story. For these reasons, I was particularly happy to welcome two essays, by **Campa** and **Sartini Blum**, which deal with women's exilic experiences. Furthermore, throughout the volume, we are reminded that we are dealing not just with literary documents, but with chronicles of suffering, such as that of the Jewish people's millenary experience (**Tosi; Kroha**).<sup>2</sup>

Thus *AdP*'s twentieth volume urges all its readers to bear in mind that we are dealing with people and not just with literary documents. Accordingly, this seventh centenary of Dante's exile, which we celebrate shortly after the beginning of the Christian era's third millennium, may be viewed as a most appropriate occasion to focus once again on exile and the condition of the exiled. The twentieth century that has just come to a closing, in fact, may have witnessed the exile, in all its deplorable forms and excesses, of the largest number of people in humankind's history, most of whom have been unable to make their suffering voices heard. These essays, spanning all centuries of Italy's literary culture, bear witness to the plethora of experiences of suffering destined to accompany humankind throughout its history, provide penetrating insights into so many literary texts, and offer a useful taxonomy of exile's transformations as a literary, cultural, and existential notion.

Moving from 1302 to 2002, and from ancient times to our own days, this volume's essays analyze the countless ways in which the experience of exile has become over the centuries the privileged *locus* for writing, not just poetry, but also philosophical and political treatises, religious meditations, autobiographical and travel accounts, and countless other forms. One can thus fully appreciate the words of Cicero and Seneca inscribed at the beginning of this introductory note. The true exile — Cicero warns us — is the absence of virtue: a challenging statement further developed by Seneca, who writes: "No land is a land of exile, but rather another *patria*"; namely, a country and a place where civic and religious virtue can be practiced in order to obtain, according to Dante's teaching and practice, beatitude first here in this life and then in the next.

In fact, the danger that lies beneath the individual's refusal to accept the exilic condition is the return to viewing exile in the manner it was conceived and practiced before its total rethinking and transformation by Graeco-Roman and

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<sup>2</sup> On the Jewish experience from the perspective of exile, I refer to the recent volume edited by Sechi and Santoro: *L'ombra lunga dell'esilio: ebraismo e memoria*.

Judeo-Christian civilization. We read in Homer, through Achilles's words to Priam, who asks for the return of his son Hector's body:

“[. . . . .] This is the way  
the gods ordained the destiny of men,  
to bear such burdens in our lives, while they  
feel no affliction. At the door of Zeus  
are those two urns of good and evil gifts  
that he may choose for us; and one for whom  
the lightning's joyous king dips in both urns  
will have by turns bad luck and good. But one  
to whom he sends all evil — that man  
goes contemptible by the will of Zeus; ravenous  
hunger drives him over the wondrous earth,  
unresting, without honor from gods or men.”

(*Iliad* 24:525-33; Fitzgerald 630-42)<sup>3</sup>

An example worthy of being imitated by all men in past and future history, Dante refused to accept the condition of exile as “contemptible.” On the contrary, he turned around the notion of being banished as despicable, thereby transforming humankind's exilic condition into a state of honor and source of pride. Although, or perhaps precisely because he was forced to taste “the salty bread of others,” he turned physical hunger (“fame”) into glory (“fama”), while wandering from place to place out of monetary needs but not because of restlessness, being honored at the same time by “gods and men.” Ultimately, one cannot but hope that the exemplary model provided to all of us by Dante will be heeded. His treatise on government that he conceived and wrote completely while he was in exile, as **Cassell** reminds us, nurtures the seed of peace while harboring Dante's hope for reconciliation.

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<sup>3</sup> “In Greece it [exile] was from earliest times a standard consequence of homicide, and was as much a religious way of getting rid of a source of pollution as a punishment. Thus Zeus in Homer's *Iliad* is said to make men exiles, driving them like a gadfly over the face of the earth (24. 532f.)” (“Exile,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* 580).