



# Dante, work, construction

VERONA, NOVEMBER 11, 2021  
Palazzo della Gran Guardia



# DANTE, WORK, CONSTRUCTION



VERONA  
PALAZZO DELLA GRAN GUARDIA  
NOVEMBER 11, 2021



English version by Carmela Borea

Cover image:

Domenico di Michelino (1417-1491):

*La Divina Commedia illuminates Florence*

Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

QUALI FIAMMINGHI TRA GUIZZANTE E BRUGGIA,  
TEMENDO 'L FIOTTO CHE 'NVER LOR S'AVVENTA,  
FANNO LO SCHERMO PERCHÉ 'L MAR SI FUGGIA;

E QUALI PADOAN LUNGO LA BRENTA,  
PER DIFENDER LOR VILLE E LOR CASTELLI,  
ANZI CHE CARENTANA IL CALDO SENTA:

A TALE IMAGINE ERAN FATTI QUELLI,  
TUTTO CHE NÉ SÌ ALTI NÉ SÌ GROSSI,  
QUAL CHE SI FOSSE, LO MAESTRO FELLI.<sup>(1)</sup>

*“Like the Flemings between Wissant and Bruges, they erect dams to keep away the tide, fearing that the waves will rush against them; and how the Padovans do it along the Brenta to defend their towns and castles before Carinthia hears the heat (let the snow melt): this is how those embankments were built, even if the builder (“the master”), whoever he was, had not erected them so tall and big.”*

Dante and Virgil walk through the burning land of the seventh circle. They proceed along a stone embankment. Below we have the Flegetonte, a river of seething blood.

<sup>(1)</sup> *Inferno* 15. 4-12.

This divine construction is compared to other works of the human brain: the artificial barriers that were built on the coasts of Flanders to take the land away from the advancing sea, and also how the Paduans reinforced the embankments. We must not imagine this work of infernal hydraulics of Cyclopean dimensions. In fact, the poet clarifies it with that “neither yes tall nor so big”.

So, these otherworldly embankments look like the dams built by the Flemings or Padovans along the Brenta, even if less great, whoever the “master” who erected them is. This verse is strange, because it is obvious that the Creator of every infernal script is always and only God. We see it here. We see it further.

LUOGO È IN INFERNO DETTO MALEBOLGE,  
TUTTO DI PIETRA DI COLOR FERRIGNO,  
COME LA CERCHIA CHE DINTORNO IL VOLGE.

NEL DRITTO MEZZO DEL CAMPO MALIGNO  
VANEGGIA UN POZZO ASSAI LARGO E PROFONDO,  
DI CUI SUO LOCO DICERÒ L'ORDIGNO.

QUEL CINGHIO CHE RIMANE ADUNQUE È TONDO  
TRA 'L POZZO E 'L PIÈ DE L'ALTA RIPA DURA,  
E HA DISTINTO IN DIECI VALLI IL FONDO.

QUALE, DOVE PER GUARDIA DE LE MURA  
PIÙ E PIÙ FOSSI CINGON LI CASTELLI,  
LA PARTE DOVE SON RENDE FIGURA,

TALE IMAGINE QUIVI FACEAN QUELLI;  
E COME A TAI FORTEZZE DA' LOR SOGLI  
A LA RIPA DI FUOR SON PONTICELLI,

COSÌ DA IMO DE LA ROCCIA SCOGLI  
MOVIEN CHE RICIDIEN LI ARGINI E ' FOSSI  
INFINO AL POZZO CHE I TRONCA E RACCOGLI.<sup>(2)</sup>

*“In Hell there is a place called Malebolgia, all made of iron-colored stone like the rocky wall that surrounds it. Right in the middle of the evil plain a very large and deep well opens in the void and, when appropriate, I will explain the conformation. That strip that remains between the well and the rocky wall is therefore round and is divided into ten valleys (Bolge). There, where multiple moats surround the castles to guard the walls, the image that they offer is quite similar to those Bolge; and how in those fortresses there are wooden bridges that join their thresholds to the banks of the moats, so from the base of the rock there were stone bridges that cut transversely the banks and the ditches, up to the central well that interrupts and reunites them.”*

Also, in this case the poet describes “the device”, the functioning of this new area, with topographical, geometric precision, with cadastral accuracy. The architecture of the eighth circle reflects the medieval architecture. It is all a game of suspended bridges, walls, ditches. This group reminds in some ways, ante litteram, the city of Octavia narrated by Italo Calvino, in his “Invisible Cities”: “If

<sup>(2)</sup> *Inferno* 18. 1-18.

*you want to believe me, fine. Now I will tell how Octavia, a spider web city, is made. There is a precipice in the middle of two steep mountains: the city is on the void, linked to the two ridges with ropes and chains and walkways. You walk on the wooden sleepers, be careful not to put your foot in the intervals, or you cling to the meshes of hemp. Below there is nothing for hundreds and hundreds of meters: a few clouds flow; the bottom of the ravine can be glimpsed further down. This is the basis of the city: a network that serves as a passage and support”*

In these two examples, the architect is God.

We can see below, instead, a construction site in progress and busy:

QUALE NE L'ARZANÀ DE' VINIZIANI  
BOLLE L'INVERNO LA TENACE PECE  
A RIMPALMARE I LEGNI LOR NON SANI,  
  
CHÉ NAVICAR NON PONNO — IN QUELLA VECE  
CHI FA SUO LEGNO NOVO E CHI RISTOPPA  
LE COSTE A QUEL CHE PIÙ VIAGGI FECE;  
  
CHI RIBATTE DA PRODA E CHI DA POPPA;  
ALTRI FA REMI E ALTRI VOLGE SARTE;  
CHI TERZERUOLO E ARTIMON RINTOPPA — ;  
  
TAL, NON PER FOCO, MA PER DIVIN'ARTE,  
BOLLIA LÀ GIUSO UNA PEGOLA SPESSA,  
CHE 'NVISCAVA LA RIPA D'OGNE PARTE.<sup>(3)</sup>

<sup>(3)</sup> *Inferno* 21. 7-18.

*“As in the Arsenal of the Venetians in winter, viscous pitch boils to repair their ships damaged, as they cannot sail (meanwhile some build a new hull and others repair the sides of the ships that made many sea trips; some hammer bow or stern nails; others fix oars and wrap the shrouds; others patch up the topsail and the helm); so lag down a thick pitch was boiling, not for a fire but for divine art, which misted every side of the walls of the Bolgia.”*

The technical terms are again of merciless precision. You would ask, and many have wondered, if in this narrative it is possible to recognize a direct visual experience. In these three examples, we have Dante struggling with those who today we would call “great works”.

A monumentality is particularly present in the Comedy, and not only in the first kingdom, where perhaps we would also expect it (Hell is an immense prison, a progression of interiors “furnished” to provide torments to the damned souls), but also in Purgatory, where we see incredible bas-reliefs that almost seem to emit smells, or talking, or moving, they are so realistic; or in Paradise, where the choreographies of the blessed souls now form crosses, now stairways, now writings in the sky.

The “great work” is the tower of Babel (Purg. 12. 34) that the giant Nembrot observes “almost lost”; the “last work” is the Comedy itself, in the invocation that the poet turns to Apollo, in the first *Canto* of Paradise.



“ The work,  
the techniques,  
the construction  
of the city of men

Yet in the whole Comedy there is no idea of “work”, as we mean it today. There is no word “work” inside of the “Dictionary of the Divina Commedia” edited by Enrico Malato for Salerno Publishing. It is not found in the most specialized search engines. According to the words, “work” from the point of view of the logical etymological truth derives from labor, which means “fatigue, suffering”.

Dante is 700 years away. If we had to look in the poem a term that can be understood as “work, operation, human activity”, would not be so much work, but rather “art”.

And this is already a precious reference. The worker is artifex, craftsman, artist, one who creates something beautiful, indeed of “divine”.

An intervention on “Dante and work” could be a risky intervention: one could slip into easy anachronisms, to misunderstand poor Dante and perhaps force him to say things he did not have in mind to say.

Yet his “cry” is as strong as “wind”<sup>(4)</sup>.

A cry that after 700 years is too faint to us. You often insist, in these days of celebrations, on “Dante, our contemporary”. The good news is that Dante is “ours”, yes, for the generosity with which he gave us a language, an imaginary, a poem full of light, hope, wisdom; the bad news is that Dante is not “contemporary”. He never was. Perhaps this is the drama of the classics. Perhaps this is their merit. The classics are always two or three steps ahead of us. They are horizons that guide our paths. They are *manna* that nourish our inner world. So it’s Dante. It is not contemporary. No. Our society has nothing to do with the one he expected. Our values rarely tune with intense spirituality of his poem. His idea of happiness (public, collective, supportive) is not ours (individualistic, private and therefore - in the end - deprived of true happiness).

But Dante is current. Very current. He is current because he pushes us daily to act.

Obviously in the mind of a 14th century man there were not present categories such as workers’ rights, trade unions and similar.

Of course.

But a dignity of work and of the worker is well present, yes, because first, in Dante, a human dignity is present. Because Dante, first of all, is interested in our life.

Life is at the center of the poem, even if the journey is a journey into the kingdom of the dead.

<sup>(4)</sup> *Paradiso* 17.133: “Questo tuo grido farà come vento” (“This cry of yours will act as the wind”)

NEL MEZZO DEL CAMMIN DI NOSTRA VITA<sup>(5)</sup>

Life is the first rhyming word in the whole Comedy. It is not a case. In Dante, nothing is accidental. And what should this life be like?

OH GIOIA! OH INEFFABILE ALLEGREZZA!  
OH VITA INTÈGRA D'AMORE E DI PACE!  
OH SANZA BRAMA SICURA RICCHEZZA!<sup>(6)</sup>

*“What a joy! What indescribable joy! What a life complete with love and peace! What a sure wealth, able to satisfy every desire!”*

Dante seeks a full, joyful, whole life, far from certain infernal fragments that also loom in our daily life.

We just think how in our society the idea of health is an idea closely related to work. Man is healthy when he is skilled at work. In this we see a mechanistic idea of man, where being a “worker” implies nuances related to punishment, to suffering<sup>(7)</sup>.

Healthy, to quote the great Indo-Catalan thinker Raimon Panikkar, is not so much the one whose organism functions as a machine without failures, but the one that is in harmony with itself and with others.

<sup>(5)</sup> *Inferno* 1.1.

<sup>(6)</sup> *Paradiso* 27.7-9.

<sup>(7)</sup> The concept is very old. It derives from Genesis and the infamous “sweat of the front”. We can also find this concept in Saint Paul: “si quis non vult operari nec manducet”, “whoever does not want to work must not eat”(2 Thess., 3 10).

And this is a fully Dantesque concept, because precisely man should not be understood simply as labor, but as artifex, artist, creator and co-creator of his own work.

The inner passage is from a homo laborans (of a man forced to work as a beast) to a homo faber creator of his own destiny, a homo creans! This creative and generative aspect is one great gift of Dante.

# “ The dignity of work in the fullness of life

Humanity progresses thanks to nature, which is regulated by God, and thanks to the work of man. We see this clearly in the 11th *canto* of Hell, where Dante hurls against the sin of usury.

DA QUESTE DUE, SE TU TI RECHI A MENTE  
LO GENESÌ DAL PRINCIPIO, CONVENE  
PRENDER SUA VITA E AVANZAR LA GENTE;

E PERCHÉ L'USURIERE ALTRA VIA TENE,  
PER SÉ NATURA E PER LA SUA SEGUACE  
DISPREGIA, POI CH'IN ALTRO PON LA SPENE.<sup>(8)</sup>

*“And if you think about what the book of Genesis says, you will see that men must obtain sustenance and progress from these two industriousness: and since the moneylender takes another path, he despises nature and, with regard to industriousness, it places in something else (and not in work) his hope.”*

<sup>(8)</sup> *Inferno* 11. 106-111.

What does the moneylender essentially do? The moneylender refuses work, and despising both nature and art, he tends only to accumulate money.

Also in this case, it is clear that work is art, a creative activity of man, which in turn imitates nature.

Since nature is the daughter of God, with an impressed image, Dante places the work/art as the grandson of God himself.

CHE L'ARTE VOSTRA QUELLA, QUANTO POTE,  
SEGUE, COME 'L MAESTRO FA 'L DISCENTE;  
SÌ CHE VOSTR'ARTE A DIO QUASI È NEPOTE<sup>(9)</sup>

*“Your industriousness follows God’s one as it can, as the disciple follows the master; so that your industriousness is almost descended from God.”*

The main point for Dante is that you have to earn from work and not from money.

Of course, Dante is not a reactionary, unfavorable to the idea of profit. What Dante criticizes is an economic-political perversion, well represented by the *Lupa*. Dante is unfavorable to a lack of circulation of money, to the idea of stagnant money typical of a greedy and non-generative mentality.

The important thing for Dante is that finances are moving, circulating. In Dante we do not have a sterile nostalgia for the past. But because a critical spirit is active in him (also from the point of view of political economic thought) he proposes the idea of gaining within an ethics.

<sup>(9)</sup> *Inferno* 11. 103-105.

What Dante suggests is a policy that is able to guide and orient the economy and not vice versa.

Let us ask ourselves today how much that cry was heard.

LA GENTE NUOVA E I SÙBITI GUADAGNI  
ORGOGGIO E DISMISURA HAN GENERATA<sup>(10)</sup>

*“New citizens and sudden earnings have created haughtiness and excess.”*

Sin is always a sin of “excess”, of hybris as the ancients would say.

So, what idea does Dante propose about work?

Work is part of life and in some way must celebrate it, embellish it. Work should not be understood as labor, suffering, wage slavery, a source of alienation and fragmentation (that, we should remember, is the logic of Hell).

Dante with his cry invites us to be artisans/artists, to build our life with fullness, also and above all through the work, the work that is passion, which is to carry on our works.

<sup>(10)</sup> *Inferno* 16.73-4.

## “ Conscious and professional work

Dante's suggestions are not those of a privileged one, of an intellectual, a “professor” who has no contact with reality, that idealizes it from the poetic point of view; these are verses that to Dante cost blood and sweat.

We are in the sky of Mars, where a glorious cross flashes, and Dante meets his ancestor Cacciaguida, who utters these harsh words. They are tremendous.

TU PROVERAI SÌ COME SA DI SALE  
LO PANE ALTRUI, E COME È DURO CALLE  
LO SCENDERE E 'L SALIR PER L'ALTRUI SCALE.<sup>(11)</sup>

*“You will experience how bitter the bread of others is, and how hard it is to go up and down the stairs of others (accept the help of powerful people).”*

<sup>(11)</sup> *Paradiso* 17.73-4.



Dante was an exile, a refugee, sentenced to death, threatened, infamous, humiliated, deprived of goods, of affection, forced to beg for hospitality and protection. The bread of exile is a salty bread because wet with tears, because so, the Scriptures said, it must be the bread of the exile.

“ The condition  
of the migrant  
worker

For this reason, the words of a man, who made a Paradise of his life that was a Hell, are even more powerful.

Work is art and in this we must be protagonists. “Free, straight, healthy”, to paraphrase his own words. We must not be slaves of infernal works, but artists who know how to recreate their own life with fullness.

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**MIRCO CITTADINI**, manager and area manager of the Social Cooperative Aribandus, director, actor, trainer, professional counselor deals with theatrical teaching. Independent scholar, researcher about Dante, he has been involved for years in the dissemination of Dante's works.

For almost fifteen years he has dedicated himself to creating dissemination and promotion events of Dante's work by collaborating with districts, municipal administrations, bookshops, associations, libraries, private individuals.

He is the author of the book *"Everything is Paradise – Lessons about Dante"* (Aporema Ed.) and of the blog, <https://nellabirintodellacommedia.wordpress.com/>.

In 2020, he cooperated with the online magazine Heraldo on the monthly column Dante's Speech. <https://www.heraldo.it/category/rubriche/dantes-speech/>

He has also the youtube page: <https://www.youtube.com/user/peterquint1/videos>

His hermeneutical curiosity has recently led him to investigate the subject of the archetypes, and in particular the theme of the "sacred feminine", within of the *Commedia*.

## DANTE, WORK, CONSTRUCTION

Dante Alighieri (Florence 1265 – Ravenna 1321) offers us a model of 'work' intended above all as 'art', as a creative human activity. Hence the idea that the worker/artist regains a centrality of his own life, in its entire fullness, and that he makes this work as a continuation of the divine work.

It is on these bases that Dante establishes the idea of dignity, awareness, inherent beauty in doing, reconnection between techniques and humanity, professionalism. And all this can still represent for us, even seven hundred years after his death, an opportunity for discussion and deep reflections which, even with the necessary and appropriate mediations, can help to illuminate visions, themes and problems of human work today.

Dante Alighieri, an exile from Florence, stayed in Verona at the beginning of the 14th century under Bartolomeo della Scala and again between 1312 and 1318 during the lordship of Cangrande. Here Dante wrote the "De Monarchia", many letters and a good part of Paradise, a cantica that he dedicated to Cangrande himself, reserving him a place of honor in the prophecy of the Seventeenth Canto.

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## DANTE, IL LAVORO, LE COSTRUZIONI

Dante Alighieri (Firenze 1265 – Ravenna 1321) ci propone un modello di 'lavoro' inteso innanzitutto come 'arte', come attività umana creatrice. Da qui l'idea che il lavoratore/artista riprenda una centralità della propria vita, nella sua integrale pienezza, e che renda tale lavoro come prosecuzione dell'opera divina. È su queste basi che Dante fonda l'idea di dignità, di consapevolezza, di bellezza insita nel fare, di riconnessione tra tecniche e umanità, di professionalità. E tutto ciò può rappresentare ancora per noi, pur a settecento anni di distanza dalla sua morte, occasione di confronto e di riflessioni profonde che, pur con le dovute ed opportune mediazioni, possono contribuire ad illuminare visioni, temi e problematiche del lavoro umano oggi.

Dante Alighieri, esule da Firenze, soggiornò a Verona agli inizi del '300 sotto Bartolomeo della Scala e di nuovo tra il 1312 e il 1318 durante la signoria di Cangrande. Qui Dante scrisse il "De Monarchia", molte lettere e buona parte del *Paradiso*, cantica che dedica allo stesso Cangrande, riservandogli un posto d'onore nella profezia del XVII canto.

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