

A Postmodern Reproduction of Dante Alighieri's Exile

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THE NOSTALGIA OF HANNIBAL LECTER: A POSTMODERN REPRODUCTION OF DANTE ALIGHIERI'S EXILE

Abstract

In this paper I shall argue that, in Ridley Scott's film Hannibal, Dr. Lecter's hiding could be interpreted as a self-enforced exile which epitomises postmodern nostalgia in his attempt to re-create the medieval past into the present. By specifically analysing the "conference" scene of Scott's film, I shall demonstrate that Dr. Lecter's study of the figures of Judas and Pier della Vigna as well as of Dante's Inferno melancholically reflects upon his own exile from America. Specifically, I shall argue that Dr. Lecter's presence in the town of Florence is a reproduction and simultaneously an inversion of Dante's exile. Indeed, by referring to the recent critical works on the practice and experience of exile in the Middle Ages (in particular, during the Italian Renaissance), I shall establish a parallel between the medieval manifestations of exile and the Doctor's experience of it. In fact, Lecter does not only refer to the medieval figures of exiles who preceded him, but also re-enacts medieval practices such as hanging in order to re-create such a past into the present. This argument shall be further sustained by means of an interpretation of Lecter's romantic feeling for FBI agent Clarice Starling as a repetition of Dante's unreciprocated love for Beatrice.

In Ridley Scott's cinematographic adaptation of Thomas Harris's novel *Hannibal*, the character of Doctor Hannibal Lecter - a brilliant psychoanalyst and literate but also a killer and sadistic cannibal - is a fugitive prisoner who leaves America in order not to be apprehended by the FBI. Lecter's escape from America is motivated by the necessity to avoid capture and imprisonment. It is a self-enforced removal from his country, which also implies the subsequent displacement due to the necessary adaptation to a new environment, to the social habits and customs of another country and its different language. However, we could interpret Lecter's escape from America (and specifically his decision to reside in the Italian town of Florence) as a sort of self-inflicted exile: Lecter attempts to escape both from society's condemnation of his cannibalistic practices and from the legislative system which has doomed him to a life of seclusion in prison. He therefore chooses exile from America in order to ensure his freedom and render his capture the more difficult.

The experience of Lecter, however, could be considered as correspondent to those of many medieval exiles. Firstly, Lecter's banishment is primarily a form of outlawry in that he is a criminal who escapes conviction. This was one of the commonest forms of exile during the Middle Ages. Indeed, according to Elisabeth van Houts's 2002 study, outlawry "normally followed the most serious crimes, called unemendable crimes" (14), such as murders or betrayal of local authorities. Could we not apply Houts's argument to Hannibal Lecter's case as well? Could his murders and cannibalistic practises be defined as other than "unemendable"? In this sense, Lecter's self-enforced departure is similar to the different forms that, according to current studies, exile assumed during the medieval age. Indeed, in C. P. Lewis's argument, for example, during the Middle Ages exile consisted in: "banishment, flight, enforced removal, captivity, voluntary departure, and many other types of displacement" (39). Many of these definitions could definitely be applied to Lecter's fictional experience. In fact, his removal from American society, initially actuated through his imprisonment in Baltimore Forensic Hospital, is further perpetuated by the Doctor himself through his self-enforced flight from the country. As in the case of many medieval exiles, Lecter's banishment is a voluntary departure which determines the risk of severe punishment in the case of return.

Secondly, Hannibal's experience could be read as exemplary of exile because of this character's specific presence in the Italian town of Florence, home of several Renaissance artists and writers such as Dante Alighieri, one of the most celebrated authors of Italian literature as well as one of the most popular exiles in Italian culture. Dante was exiled in perpetuity and under the penalty of death from Florence in 1301. This caused "the opening of a wound which bled for the remainder of his life" (Pertile 46) because, as Marianne Shapiro suggests, he "was to remain all of his life a proud Florentine" (191) and incessantly hoped to be readmitted to his beloved town. Particularly, Dante hoped to return from exile as a crowned poet and

thus to be recognised as a proper citizen of the town. It is significant then that Hannibal, who decides to escape captivity in America, settles down in the hometown of one of the major exiles in Italian literature, particularly if we also consider that Renaissance Italy at large was the geographical area with the greatest amount of political exiles in the whole Europe, as Christine Shaw has pointed out (6).

The decision on the part of Lecter to live in Florence could be motivated by the fact that, as viewers are shown in *Hannibal*, the Doctor is revealed to be an expert of Renaissance studies. Indeed, in a specific scene of Scott's film, Lecter (posing as Dr. Fell) presents an academic paper on the works of Dante. This conference takes place at Palazzo Vecchio, the most popular building of Medieval Florence as well as one of the most significant public places in Italy. Hannibal is in the town hall of Florence and offers an analysis of the works of the major Florentine poet in Italian culture, one of the very first Italian literates, while addressing a public of experts in the field who are evaluating his fitness for the position of curator of the Capponi library. What is interesting to note is the fact that, after his ten years of hiding, the Doctor has chosen not to reprise the post of therapist and forensic psychiatrist he held in America in favour of a position of scholar and literate in Italy. The specific choice of Renaissance culture in Lecter's research interests is thus, in my opinion, a central indicator of the Doctor's personal fascination with such a period and further demonstrates his personal connection with the figures of exiles who preceded him, and particularly Dante.

By attempting to enter the Italian academia and therefore settle down in Florence (establishing his residence in the Capponi library, one of the town's Renaissance buildings), Hannibal is, in a certain way, taking the place of Dante himself, assuming an official position, a public role and recognition which Dante could not achieve during his life. As we saw before, Dante was exiled in perpetuity from the town of Florence and was never officially recognized as a crowned poet during his life time by the citizens of his native town. In a similar respect, by attempting to enter the prestigious academic environment, Lecter wants to be recognised as an established scholar, as a crowned literate. In this way, he inverts Dante's experience of life-long exile. Indeed, on the one hand, both figures are exiles from their lands and regret not being able to return to them. On the other hand, Hannibal freely enters and lives in Florence (although he is disguised as Dr. Fell) as well as he is finally recognised as a literate, thus fulfilling Dante's dreams.

Nevertheless, in spite of the distinguished position he manages to acquire in the Italian academia, Lecter is represented as nostalgic of America and sad for living far from it. This is demonstrated by the fact that, as he himself admits, during the ten years he spent as a fugitive, the Doctor has been in "a state of hibernation". During a phone call with FBI special agent Clarice Starling, he considers this as a "retirement" which, in his own words, he "need[s] to come out from". The very fact that he describes his "inclination" towards homicides and cannibalistic practices as a "need" which must however be satisfied and fulfilled points to the fact that he does not appear to be entirely satisfied of the new life he is conducting in Italy. We could therefore think of Hannibal's cannibalistic and murderous habits as actually dormant in Florence (at least, up to his discovery of Italian chief inspector Rinaldo Pazzi's suspicions about his identity). Even if momentarily, Lecter has apparently abandoned the obscure side of his life, we could say, and is mainly concerned with achieving a respected position inside the Italian academic world.

On the other hand, Hannibal is explicitly represented as melancholic about his past and his previous life in America by means of Anthony Hopkins's very interpretation of the character during the aforementioned "conference" scene. The presentation of Dr. Lecter's paper on Dante is delivered with a melancholic tone of voice: it seems that Dante's words remind the Doctor of a joyous past life which is now negated to him. This could also be specifically noticed by observing that Lecter assumes a particularly unhappy facial expression exactly when concluding his academic paper with a quotation and translation of Dante's phrase from the *Inferno* "io fei gibetto a me de le mie case" ("I made my own home be my gallows"). Hannibal's sad tone of voice is further punctuated by the pensive silence and meditative position he assumes as soon as the last words of his paper are pronounced. Lecter stops facing his public of scholars; he stops looking at the screenings he had been commenting upon and only glares at the floor, seemingly lost in thought and remembering his past. We could then argue that Hannibal made America his own gallows: returning to such a country would mean for him to be put on the gallows, that is, to be condemned for his crimes. By pausing after his pronunciation of Dante's words as well as by making them the final words of his conference paper, Hannibal could thus be seen as reflecting on his experience of exile, commenting upon it and almost revealing it in public.

Hannibal's condition of exile can be interpreted as a form of postmodern nostalgia, according to Fredric Jameson's definition of the term. Jameson, one of the major contemporary theorists on postmodernity, defines nostalgia in contemporary films as an attempt to re-experience the past through the reference to and recreation of a particular historical period's cultural artefacts (qtd. in Dika 10). This is precisely what the character of Lecter repeatedly does throughout the narrative of *Hannibal*. Indeed, we could interpret Hannibal's presentation of his paper on hanging in Dante and the Bible not only as representing the Doctor's reflection on the cannibalistic and homicidal practices he used to have in America and as expressing his sadness for being forced to live somewhere else, but also as a reproduction of the medieval past itself. Dr. Lecter is analysing and speculating on the medieval mind while showing a series of screenings that shows several representations of hanging as depicted on different artefacts, such as an ivory box in Gaul of the fifth century, a plate from the doors of the ninth-century Benevento cathedral and a fifteenth-century illustration of Dante's *Inferno*.

Such a re-creation of the past is nevertheless undoubtedly grounded in the present: the scholars present in Palazzo Vecchio as well as the viewer are not examining the ancient and medieval artefacts themselves but their images as projected on an enormous drop cloth covering the wall, that is, as presented by means of an instrument of contemporary technology. In the same respect, it is Lecter's perspective which links such representations of the artefacts with the present. Indeed, the various images the Doctor comments upon date from very different historical periods. However, although different in their provenience as well, all of these artefacts, in the Doctor's argument, evidence the similarity between Judas Iscariot's death by hanging and that of the eleventh-century jurist and writer Pier della Vigna as they are filtered through Dante's words in the *Inferno*. Lecter traces a common pattern which bridges several millennia, but simultaneously links them with the present.

This is achieved by means of the various similarities that are pointed out between the various historical and Biblical characters referred to and quoted by Lecter during the "conference" scene and the character of inspector Pazzi (Giancarlo Giannini). Firstly, by identifying Judas Iscariot with Pier della Vigna, the Doctor underlines the similarity between two figures that are actually separated by twelve centuries of history. Indeed, according to Lecter's reading of ancient and medieval artefacts as well as of Dante's *Inferno*, avarice has been one of the causes of Judas's betrayal of Christ as much as the cause of Pier della Vigna's disgrace, imprisonment and successive suicide. Avarice has led both Judas and Pier della Vigna to hanging. The same destiny is reserved to the Italian inspector who chooses not to inform his colleagues at the Questura about the fugitive Lecter's presence in Florence - thus violating the principles of his profession - because of the substantial reward offered for Hannibal's capture. It is Pazzi's greed for money which determines his tragic death and renders his experience a repetition of that of Judas and Pier della Vigna.

The juxta/contraposition of the past with the present is also achieved in this scene by means of the union and intermingling of ancient images and melodies with contemporary sound effects. The images of the various ancient and medieval artefacts the Doctor examines are accompanied by the film's soundtrack (composed by Hans Zimmer) which, in this scene, specifically presents a chorus of operatic voices similar to the medieval choral singing. Nevertheless, the past is ironically set against the present by means of contemporary technology stubbornly worming its way in through the ringing mobile phone of inspector Pazzi. The ancient and medieval images (filtered through Lecter's interpretation of them) as well as the medieval atmosphere alluded to by the soundtrack are abruptly interrupted by the intrusion of the sound of a contemporary and much-diffused instrument of communication which definitely characterizes the contemporary age and culture.

On the other hand, the medieval past is not only reproduced by Lecter through the use of screenings, but also by means of his actions. Indeed, immediately after the audience of scholars has left the room, Lecter re-enacts a medieval and Biblical hanging with his murder of inspector Pazzi. Hannibal re-produces with precision the hanging of Pazzi's ancestor from Palazzo Vecchio's balcony in the very same locations. Five hundred years after his ancestor Francesco de Pazzi, the inspector is hanged by Hannibal from the same balcony and his bowels fall on the ground of the same Piazza. This is, however, a postmodern re-production of the past. Indeed, it is significant to note that director Ridley Scott has inserted in this scene a close-up which shows in detail the impact of Pazzi's mobile phone on the ground of the Piazza's pavement, which is immediately followed by the inspector's bowels. A contemporary tool of communication (the same

which interrupted Hannibal's delivery of his paper on biblical and medieval hanging) is shown in this close-up together with a particular image which alludes to a medieval practice. This contraposition ironically evidences the difference between the two historically-distant episodes of hanging. Lecter's re-creation of the past is therefore enacted in a typically postmodern way in that the similarity of Lecter's experience with those of his medieval predecessors is asserted simultaneously with the emphasis on its difference from them. This is what constitutes postmodern irony, which is, according to critics such as Jameson (4) and Linda Hutcheon (11), one of the fundamental characteristics of postmodern culture and its artistic representations. In Hutcheon's argument, in fact, irony is defined as a practice extremely frequent in postmodern narratives which "allows [an] ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity" (26). Lecter's murder of Pazzi is portrayed with the use of postmodern irony: to apply Hutcheon's words, it "does indeed mark the difference from the past, but the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm [. . .] the connection with the past" (125). Hannibal Lecter re-creates history, almost with an ironic intent, specifically if we consider the anachronistic nature of the act of hanging in Europe during the year 2000 in which the story is set.

The murder of inspector Pazzi thus attempts to re-establish the same historical circumstances of medieval hanging. In this sense, we could thus affirm that history repeats itself, but, in this specific case, it is Lecter who ensures such a repetition. This is particularly relevant if we consider that, in a certain respect, during the reading of his paper on hanging, Hannibal is suggesting and describing the treatment that he has reserved for the Italian inspector. Hannibal is explicitly stating what he is going to do after the reading of his paper. The Doctor even touches Pazzi's shoulder as if to suggest that the discourse on hanging is specifically addressed to him. This occurs precisely when he is quoting Dante's words "*e per la mesta selva saranno i nostri corpi appesi*" (throughout the sad forest our bodies shall be hanged). In this way, the paper on Dante is actually a personal lecture for Pazzi, a lecture referring simultaneously to the past represented by Pazzi's ancestor and to the present of Pazzi himself. It is a lecture which prescribes the following postmodern re-creation of the past in its simultaneous identity with and difference from the present.

The postmodern reproduction of a past event into the contemporary age could be ulteriorly traced in Ridley Scott's film in regard to Lecter's personal feelings towards the FBI agent Clarice Starling. Indeed, a comparison could be established between Hannibal's and Dante's unreciprocated romantic loves, respectively for Starling and Beatrice Portinari. During the narrative of *Hannibal*, Lecter falls in love with the FBI agent (interpreted in this film by Julianne Moore) and continually expresses his explicit appreciations for her beauty as well as he attempts to repeatedly contact her. Although Clarice and Hannibal have actually met only three times in *The Silence of the Lambs*, in *Hannibal* the Doctor manifests a very strong feeling for her, feeling which is particularly similar to the one that Dante experienced for Beatrice and that was subsequently described in *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*). In this 1295 work, the Italian literate depicts his few encounters with the Florentine woman and his subsequent deep and passionate love for her. Such a love was never openly manifested by Dante, who was already married to Gemma Donati and never addressed personally Beatrice. This is reflected in Dante's work itself, in which, as Lino Pertile has pointed out, Beatrice is represented as a sort of "vision, an angel, a divine messenger" (42) and *La Vita Nuova* is the story of "gazes from afar, desires, imaginings and dreams" (42). The same is true in the case of Hannibal Lecter, who merely writes a letter to Starling while looking at her picture on the Italian and international newspapers which describe her as "the angel of death". The Doctor thus simply remembers Starling from their encounters in Baltimore and experiences his love for her from afar without actually trying to openly manifest it and be corresponded.

What is interesting to note is the fact that Lecter himself seems to recognize the similarity between his own love for Starling and Dante's feeling for Beatrice. Indeed, the Doctor explicitly quotes some passages of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and even manages to find the original manuscript of such a work's first sonnet. This is specifically shown in the "opera" scene of Scott's film, in which, after attending the opera in Florence, Lecter encounters inspector Pazzi and his beautiful wife Allegra (Francesca Neri) at a party. The Doctor offers the original manuscript of Dante's *Vide Cor Meum* - the first sonnet from *La Vita Nuova*, which explicitly describes the love at first sight of the Florentine literate for Beatrice ("Love appeared to me so suddenly That I still shudder at the memory") - to Allegra and eagerly listens to her reading it aloud. What is important to note is the fact that, while talking to Allegra, Lecter explicitly agrees on her argument that "a man

could become so obsessed with a woman from a single encounter". By quoting a passage describing Dante's first-sight love for Beatrice, Lecter could then be seen as actually referring to his own love for the female FBI agent. Dante's passage could therefore be applied to Lecter's encounter with Starling in the Baltimore prison and his subsequent obsession with her. This is further emphasized by the fact that Allegra's reading of Dante's sonnet precisely follows the operatic adaptation of it sung at the opera. Dante's words are given central importance by being both spoken and sung during this part of the film.

The parallel between the character of Hannibal and Dante is therefore established on different levels and is repeated many times during the narrative. Hannibal's confrontation with the past, with the historical figures of exiles preceding him, is experienced as a form of reflection on his displacement and expresses his nostalgia for his American country. The nostalgic sense of loss of such a country is certainly much emphasized in Ridley Scott's film. Nostalgia is experienced in a postmodern way by being expressed through the attempt to re-produce the medieval past into the present. In a certain way, and by considering that the final scene of the film depicts the Doctor as escaping again from America by boarding a plane probably directed to Japan (all the passengers on the flight are Japanese), we could affirm that this is the story of a character who continues to be an exile, to be far from both his land and the person he loves. The (fictitious) story of Hannibal Lecter is the tale of an unreciprocated love and of a life conducted through various peregrinations.

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