

Review Article

Geographies of Banishment: Quiet Defiance and Radical Serenity in Su Shi and Dante Alighieri

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Abstract

*This comparative study examines the intersection of spatial displacement, political exile, and spiritual resilience in the works of Song Dynasty poet Su Shi and Medieval Italian poet Dante. Involuntarily uprooted from their respective political centers, the Song imperial court in Kaifeng and the Republican commune of Florence, both authors transformed the trauma of geographic banishment into sites of profound literary and philosophical transcendence. Through a comparative analysis of Su Shi's exile prose and poetry alongside Dante's *Convivio* and *La Divina Commedia*, this paper argues both writers developed a posture of 'quiet defiance' grounded in 'radical serenity.' While Dante remapped his physical estrangement into a cosmic itinerary of moral order and divine justice, Su Shi synthesized Confucian duty, Daoist spontaneity, and Chan Buddhist detachment to cultivate a resilient, untrammelled acceptance of peripheral existence. By mapping these geographies of banishment, the physical expulsion across borders and the existential isolation, this study demonstrates how involuntary displacement can be reclaimed as an interior geography of spiritual liberation. In doing so, it challenges conventional East and West dichotomies regarding agency, exile, and selfhood, revealing that the displaced subject is not merely a passive victim of geopolitical force, but an active architect of inner emancipation.*

Keywords: Exile Literature, Comparative Literature, Geographies of Banishment, Spatial Humanities, Radical Serenity, Su Shi, Dante Alighieri

1. Introduction

1.1. The Cartography of Displacement

This study establishes a comparative dialogue between two preeminent figures of world literature who experienced involuntary political banishment: the Song Dynasty polymath Su Shi (1037 to 1101, also known as Su Dongpo) and the Medieval Florentine poet Dante Alighieri (1265 to 1321). In 1079, following the Crow Terrace Poetry Case (Wutai Shi'an), Su Shi was arrested, interrogated, and banished to Huangzhou, later suffering further peripheral banishment to Huizhou and the remote island of Hainan. Two decades later, in 1302, amid the factional conflict between White and Black Guelphs, Dante was condemned in absentia, fined, and permanently banished from Florence under pain of death by burning.

Exile is rarely a neutral geographic event; it is an existential tearing of the self from the civic, political, and spatial structures that confer identity. When political authority expels the writer from the center to the periphery, banishment is intended as a form of social erasure and civic death. Yet, in the literary histories of both East Asia and the West, the geography of displacement has frequently functioned as the primary catalyst for artistic transcendence and moral autonomy. Deprived of their institutional standing, exiled creators are compelled to reconstruct their relationship to space, transforming the wilderness of banishment into an interior landscape of spiritual sovereignty. In this altered geography, physical isolation ceases to be a mark of punishment and becomes instead the precondition for critical detachment. By mapping their trauma onto verse and prose, the banished writer reclaims the margin not as a site of marginalization, but as the true center of ethical and artistic authority.

Though separated by geography, language, and worldview, both writers faced the immediate crisis of political erasure. Neither submitted to despair, nor did they retreat into passive resignation. Instead, both leveraged their physical displacement to construct an interior cartography of ‘quiet defiance’ and ‘radical serenity.’ Through close textual analysis of Su Shi’s exile fu (rhapsodies) and poetry alongside Dante’s *Convivio* and *La Divine Comedy*, this paper explores how involuntary geographic movement from center to periphery can be reclaimed as a space for moral authority and spiritual liberation. By synthesizing Su Shi’s Daoist-Buddhist detachment with Dante’s Christian eschatological vision, the study demonstrates how physical banishment becomes a catalyst for transcendence rather than intellectual defeat. Ultimately, both figures demonstrate that when imperial or civic structures cast out the individual, literary creation functions as a transcendent, self-governing court of truth.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Spatial Humanities and the Geographies of Banishment:

To evaluate the transformation of exile in Su Shi and Dante, this paper draws upon spatial theory and critical geography, particularly Edward Said’s reflections on exile and Henri Lefebvre’s conceptualization of space. For Said, exile is fundamentally an experience of rupture and displacement. He famously describes it as ‘the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home’ [1]. Yet the optimist Said does not regard exile solely as a condition of loss. He also identifies in the exile an ‘originality of vision,’ arising from the capacity to perceive the world from a position of distance and displacement. The exile, no longer securely located within a single homeland, may apprehend different places and cultural landscapes in relation to one another, developing what Said describes as a ‘contrapuntal’ awareness. This tension between rupture and expanded vision is highly relevant to Su Shi and Dante, whose experiences of banishment transform geographical displacement into distinctive modes of reflection on self, place, belonging, and the world.

Furthermore, Lefebvre’s spatial triad, spatial practices (perceived space), representations of space (conceived space), and representational spaces (lived space), provides a useful framework for understanding banishment as a process of spatial exclusion [2]. Through exile, the political state seeks not merely to remove the individual from a particular geographical location but also to sever the individual’s relationship with the social, cultural, and symbolic spaces that constitute a sense of belonging. In both Imperial Kaifeng and Republican Florence, political authority exercised control over physical territories as well as the conceptual meanings attached to them, relegating the exile to the margins of the dominant social order. Thus, exile can be understood as a displacement from not only physical space but also from the lived and meaningful spaces through which identity, belonging, and social existence are constituted.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a comparative, interdisciplinary, and close-reading, in English translation, methodology to examine how

political banishment is transformed into a source of intellectual, spiritual, and creative agency in the works of Su Shi and Dante Alighieri. The analysis focuses primarily on Su Shi’s writings from his periods of exile, particularly *Former Rhapsody on the Red Cliff* (Qian Chibi Fu) and works associated with Huangzhou and Hainan, alongside Dante’s *Convivio* and *Commedia*, especially the passages concerning exile in *Paradiso XVII*. The study combines textual analysis with spatial theory and exile studies to examine how geographical displacement affects identity, belonging, memory, and the experience of place. Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad, spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, is employed to investigate how political authorities construct and regulate spaces of exclusion and how exiled subjects subsequently reinterpret and appropriate those spaces. Edward Said’s conception of exile as a profound rupture between the individual and the native place provides a complementary framework for understanding the psychological and cultural dimensions of displacement.

Within this theoretical framework, the study develops three analytical categories; Radical Serenity, Creative Sovereignty, and Quiet Defiance, to identify the different ways in which Su Shi and Dante respond to banishment. These categories are not treated as fixed historical concepts but as interpretive tools derived from the close reading of their texts in English translation. The comparison is therefore not intended to establish a direct historical influence between the two writers; rather, it places their distinct cultural, philosophical, and religious contexts in dialogue to reveal both convergences and differences in their responses to exile. Particular attention is given to the transformation of marginal geographical spaces into sites of intellectual freedom, aesthetic creation, moral reflection, and spiritual belonging. Through this combination of close reading, spatial analysis, and cross-cultural comparison, the study argues that exile, while imposed as an instrument of political exclusion, can be imaginatively reconstituted by the displaced subject as a space of autonomy and self-definition.

‘Geographies of Banishment, as deployed in this study, examines how Su Shi and Dante transformed spaces of political exclusion and geographical marginality into spaces of intellectual, moral, and creative freedom. Their responses to exile can be understood through three interconnected dimensions:

3.1. Radical Serenity

The deliberate cultivation of inner equilibrium in circumstances of physical deprivation, political hostility, and existential uncertainty. Radical serenity does not imply passive resignation or indifference to suffering; rather, it refers to the exile’s conscious effort to attain psychological and spiritual freedom even when external circumstances remain beyond his control. In this respect, the concept resonates with Thoreau’s insistence on the possibility of an inwardly free life despite the constraints imposed by external circumstances. As Thoreau observes in *Walden*, ‘The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation’ suggesting that genuine freedom requires an inward reorientation rather than merely a change in outward circumstances [3]. For Su Shi and Dante, exile similarly becomes an occasion to cultivate an inner autonomy that political

power cannot completely control.

3.2. Quiet Defiance

The refusal to allow political or institutional authority to determine the exile's moral worth, intellectual identity, or understanding of truth. This defiance need not take the form of armed rebellion or direct political confrontation; it may instead be expressed through intellectual persistence, reflection, ethical self-discipline, and creative production. Giordano Bruno offers a powerful historical parallel. Although Bruno was not simply 'exiled' for supporting heliocentrism, his advocacy of Copernican ideas, together with his broader philosophical and theological positions, brought him into conflict with the Roman Inquisition. His refusal to abandon his intellectual convictions, even in the face of persecution and eventual execution in 1600, illustrates the principle of intellectual independence that underlies quiet defiance. Similarly, Su Shi and Dante transformed writing and intellectual creation into forms of resistance, refusing to surrender their inner authority to the political powers that had banished them.

3.3. Creative Sovereignty

Creative Sovereignty: The transformation of the place of exile from a site imposed by political power into a space appropriated through imagination, cultural production, and intellectual activity. Through poetry and writing, Su Shi and Dante gave new meanings to landscapes that had initially represented punishment, exclusion, or political marginalization. Victor Hugo provides a compelling comparative example: during his prolonged exile from France, he continued to write extensively, and his years in exile contributed to the composition and completion of *Les Misérables* (1862). His experience demonstrates how geographical displacement could be transformed into a site of intellectual and creative productivity. Similarly, for Su Shi and Dante, the place of banishment became more than a geographical location; through literary imagination, it became a space they could interpret, inhabit, and symbolically reclaim on their own terms. Exile, therefore, did not merely remove them from a homeland; it generated new imaginative geographies in which the displaced subject could exercise a form of creative sovereignty.

While Dante remapped his physical homelessness across northern Italy into an absolute, cosmic geography of divine judgment, Su Shi integrated Daoist *ziran* (spontaneity), Chan Buddhist detachment, and Confucian duty to dissolve the boundary between center and margin. Their geographical displacement therefore did not amount to intellectual or spiritual defeat. In this sense, Hemingway's famous observation in his *The Old Man and the Sea*, 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated', provides a useful comparative formulation of their resilience [4]. Both Su Shi and Dante experienced political exclusion and the loss of their established social positions, yet neither accepted these circumstances as a final defeat of the self. Instead, they transformed displacement into a source of intellectual, spiritual, and creative renewal. Their achievement lay not in overcoming exile geographically, but in refusing to allow exile to determine the ultimate meaning of their

existence.

4. Su Shi

4.1. Kuangda and the Transformation of Peripheral Space

Su Shi's banishment following the Crow Terrace Poetry Case marked a profound rupture in his life, abruptly transforming him from a high-ranking imperial official into a politically suspect exile under close surveillance in Huangzhou. Deprived of his official position, income, and administrative authority, he experienced economic hardship, social marginalization, and the uncertainty of life under political suspicion. Yet Huangzhou also became a transformative space in which Su Shi gradually reconstituted his relationship with exile. Taking up farming on a tract of land known as the 'Eastern Slope' (Dongpo), he developed a new mode of living that combined physical simplicity with intellectual and spiritual freedom. It was within this peripheral landscape that his characteristic *kuangda*, an expansive, liberated and resilient disposition capable of confronting worldly adversity without being inwardly defeated, came to the fore. Thus, the geographical margin imposed upon Su Shi by political authority became a space in which he cultivated a new form of inner freedom and creative selfhood.

The Re-enchantment of Landscape: Su Shi's *Former Ode on the Red Cliff* (Qian Chibi Fu, 1082) provides a powerful expression of his radical serenity in the face of political marginalization, human mortality, and the uncertainty of existence. Written during his exile in Huangzhou, the rhapsody begins with Su Shi and his companions drifting by boat on the Yangtze beneath the cliffs of Chibi. The beauty and vastness of the natural landscape initially evoke a sense of freedom and wonder, but this mood is soon interrupted by the guest's meditation on human mortality and impermanence. Reflecting on the contrast between the fleeting human lifespan and the seemingly eternal rhythms of nature, the guest (unnamed) laments, through his flute, that human beings are 'like mayflies between heaven and earth, a mere grain in the vast ocean' and grieves that their lives are transient while the Yangtze continues its endless flow. Yet the rhapsody does not remain in despair. Su Shi gradually transforms this awareness of mortality into a broader acceptance of human limitations, recognizing that although human life is finite, one can still participate in the enduring beauty of nature through perception, friendship, and spiritual freedom.

In this movement from grief to acceptance, the poem exemplifies radical serenity: not an escape from suffering, but the capacity to confront impermanence without allowing it to destroy the self. In response to the guest's lament over the brevity of human life, Su Shi offers a profound philosophical reorientation. Drawing upon an expansive vision of natural spontaneity (*ziran*) and a stance of non-attachment associated with Chan Buddhism, he shifts attention away from the limitations of individual human existence toward the larger rhythms of nature. He explains 'if you look at the aspect which changes, heaven and earth cannot last for one blink; but if you look at the aspect which is changeless, the worlds within and outside you are both inexhaustible, and what reasons have you to

envy anything?’ [5]. Rather than denying change or mortality, Su Shi asks people to recognize that impermanence is only one way of perceiving existence. From another perspective, the natural world, and the self as part of that world, participates in an inexhaustible continuity. His response therefore transforms the guest’s anxiety about mortality into an acceptance of life’s changing conditions.

This philosophical shift lies at the heart of Su Shi’s radical serenity: he does not overcome exile by escaping its realities, but by transforming his relationship to them. Through this change of perspective, the site of banishment ceases to function merely as a place of punishment or political confinement. Instead, Su Shi reimagines the river, the breeze, and the moon as an inexhaustible and unowned treasury of joy, accessible to anyone capable of perceiving them without attachment. In this sense, nature becomes a space of spiritual freedom rather than a backdrop to political exile.

A comparable vision appears in the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth’s *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, where he describes Nature as capable of leading the human mind ‘from joy to joy’ and of impressing it ‘with quietness and beauty,’ even amid ‘solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief’ [6]. Wordsworth’s formulation provides a useful comparative parallel to Su Shi: in both poets, the natural world becomes a medium through which suffering is not denied but transformed into inward composure and spiritual renewal. Su Shi’s physical exile from Kaifeng is therefore inverted into a form of existential liberation: the landscape imposed upon him by political authority becomes, through perception and imagination, a space of freedom that political authority cannot take away from him.

The Peripheral Sanctuary: Hainan and the Aesthetics of the Everyday: When Su Shi was exiled even farther south to Hainan in his later years; his experience of banishment became still more severe. For Song officials, Hainan was a remote and culturally marginal frontier, associated with unfamiliar customs, harsh climatic conditions, and the dangers of disease. Yet rather than allowing this extreme geographical displacement to become a source of despair, Su Shi extended his *kuangda*, his expansive and resilient disposition, into the everyday practices of life. He adapted himself to the local environment, learned about the region’s agricultural practices, interacted with the indigenous ‘Li communities,’ and built a modest dwelling for himself.

Su Shi also continued to write, finding meaning and even pleasure in the ordinary experiences of survival and daily life. His response to Hainan therefore represents a particularly vivid form of quiet defiance: instead of allowing political banishment to define him as a defeated or marginalized subject, he demonstrated through the way he lived that dignity, intellectual freedom, and human flourishing could persist even at the geographical margins of the empire. In this sense, Su Shi transformed the place intended to signify political exclusion into a space of adaptation, creativity, and inner sovereignty.

In his writings associated with Dongpo, Su Shi repeatedly presents his life at Huangzhou as an opportunity to discover dignity and freedom within material simplicity. Although political authority had deprived him of office, status, and economic security, he increasingly located his sense of autonomy in the manner in which he lived rather than in his relationship to the imperial court. His cultivation of the land at Dongpo, the construction of a modest dwelling, and his continued poetic and intellectual activity transformed material deprivation into a form of self-sufficiency. In this sense, Su Shi’s response to exile suggests that political authority could determine his geographical location and official status, but it could not determine where his mind, imagination, and spirit would dwell [7].

Su Shi’s strategy of radical serenity did not depend on condemning his persecutors, seeking revenge, or constructing an abstract system of retaliation. His quiet defiance lay instead in his refusal to allow political punishment to diminish his sense of self. By discovering aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual richness in unfamiliar landscapes, modest food, agricultural labor, friendship, and everyday human relationships, he transformed the conditions of exile into sources of meaning and creative vitality. In doing so, Su Shi deprived political banishment of its intended power: the state could control his official position and geographical location, but it could not determine the value he found in life or the manner in which he inhabited the world. The geographical margin thus became a psychological and creative center. The periphery became his center.

5. Dante Alighieri

5.1. The Cosmic Cartography of the Exile

Where Su Shi responded to banishment by collapsing the distinction between center and periphery through quiet, immanent acceptance, Dante Alighieri responded by expanding his geographic exile into an absolute, transcendental domain. Exiled from Florence in 1302 under pain of death by burning, Dante spent the remainder of his life as a mountain-dwelling wanderer across the fragmented city-states of northern Italy. The trauma of this political displacement was both material and existential; as a prominent White Guelph politician and former magistrate (prior), Dante was stripped of his property, citizenship, and social standing.

6. The Humiliation of Homelessness

6.1. Convivio and Paradiso

Dante’s prose work *Convivio* (1304–1307) provides one of the most explicit accounts of the psychological and social humiliations produced by political exile. After his expulsion from Florence, Dante was deprived not only of his native city but also of the social security, status, and sense of belonging associated with citizenship. As an itinerant intellectual dependent at various times upon the hospitality and patronage of noble courts, he experienced the precarious condition of a person without a stable political home. Reflecting bitterly on his banishment, Dante writes of Florence as the city that had ‘cast me out from her sweet bosom’ and describes himself as wandering through different regions ‘a stranger, almost a beggar,’ compelled to

display 'the wound of fortune' (Convivio.). His words reveal that exile was not merely geographical displacement; it was also an experience of humiliation, dependence, and wounded identity. The loss of Florence therefore became an enduring psychological condition, shaping Dante's understanding of belonging, justice, and human dignity. Yet this wounded homelessness would later undergo a profound transformation in his poetry: in the *Paradiso*, geographical exile is increasingly transcended by a larger spiritual geography in which divine order, rather than political citizenship, becomes the ultimate ground of belonging.

This profound sense of displacement finds one of its most memorable poetic expressions in Canto XVII of Dante's *Paradiso*. Here, Cacciaguida, Dante's ancestor and a revered figure from the history of Florence, foretells the exile that Dante will soon endure. His prophecy captures the material and psychological hardships of displacement through two striking images: 'Thou shalt prove how salt a taste hath the bread of another, / and how hard a path it is to go up and down upon another's stairs' [8]. The 'salt' taste of another's bread evokes the humiliation of dependence upon the generosity of others, while the unfamiliar stairs symbolize the uncertainty and instability of wandering from one household or court to another. Exile is therefore presented not simply as separation from Florence but as a loss of autonomy, dignity, and secure belonging. The prophecy anticipates the condition already described in *Convivio*: Dante becomes a stranger who must depend upon others for shelter and sustenance.

Yet the significance of the passage extends beyond personal suffering. By placing the prophecy within *Paradiso*, Dante retrospectively transforms his experience of political displacement into part of a larger moral and providential journey, preparing the way for the transformation of earthly homelessness into a more enduring form of spiritual belonging. Yet, Dante's exile was not merely a record of suffering. It became the necessary condition for his prophetic authority. Displaced from the corrupt politics of Florence, Dante liberated himself from local party factions, declaring himself a party of one, 'a party unto yourself' (*a te stesso fatta parte*).

7. Prophetic Defiance

7.1. Remapping Florence in The Divine Comedy

In *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), Dante transforms his experience of political exile into an act of prophetic and intellectual defiance. Rather than accepting the erasure of his civic identity by the Florentine authorities, he constructs a poetic world in which earthly political power is subordinated to a higher moral and divine order. The journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* (Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise) therefore functions as a vast counter-geography: Dante imaginatively remaps the moral universe and places individuals, institutions, and political authorities within a system of divine justice. Florence, which had expelled him from its civic community, is no longer the ultimate authority over his identity or destiny. From the perspective of the *Commedia*, even powerful rulers and religious authorities

are subject to judgment according to principles that transcend temporal politics.

Dante thus reverses the relationship between exile and authority: the man who was politically silenced becomes the poet who speaks with prophetic authority, while those who exercised power over him become subjects of his moral and cosmic judgment. His quiet defiance lies not in physical rebellion but in the creation of an alternative moral geography in which political power cannot claim the final word. In the depths of *Inferno*, Dante places his living political enemies, including Pope Boniface VIII and the Black Guelph leader Corso Donati, into eternal damnation, while establishing an unyielding moral order governed by divine justice (*contrapasso*). By doing so, Dante reverses the terms of his banishment: it is not Dante who has been cast out from the true city, but rather corrupt Florence that has exiled itself from the Kingdom of God. Dante's 'radical serenity' differs fundamentally from Su Shi's Daoist and Chan-inflected response to exile. It does not arise primarily from detachment from worldly affairs or from an acceptance of nature's spontaneous rhythms; rather, it is grounded in Dante's faith in a higher moral and divine order.

Through the composition of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante transforms his experience of physical homelessness into a spiritual pilgrimage toward a transcendent homeland. As Lino Pertile observes, the *Commedia* brings together Dante's condition as an exile from Florence and his journey as a pilgrim toward his heavenly home, making earthly exile part of a larger journey from the human toward the divine. Dante's geographical exile from Florence thus becomes, within the poem, part of a larger journey through *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, culminating in the vision of divine presence [9]. Earthly banishment is therefore reinterpreted as temporary rather than absolute: the loss of a political homeland does not mean the loss of belonging itself. Dante's true home is ultimately located beyond the shifting boundaries of earthly cities and political authorities. His serenity rests not on escaping the pain of exile, but on placing that pain within a larger providential and eternal framework.

When Su Shi and Dante Alighieri were banished from the political centers of eleventh-century Song China and fourteenth-century Florence, exile sought to sever them from the civic and political communities in which they had established their identities and influence. Su Shi was removed from imperial office and repeatedly relocated to distant regions of the Song Empire, while Dante was permanently excluded from Florence and forced into prolonged displacement. For both writers, banishment involved the loss of political status, geographical belonging, and participation in their native civic communities. Yet their literary responses demonstrate how involuntary spatial displacement could be transformed into a site of intellectual and inner autonomy.

Dante's *Commedia* (Divine Comedy), for example, transforms his condition as a Florentine exile into a larger spiritual and moral journey, while simultaneously allowing him to reassess Florence

and its political order from the perspective of a higher conception of justice [9,10]. Neither writer ultimately allowed political exclusion to determine the meaning of his intellectual or creative life. Both developed forms of quiet defiance through which literary creation became a means of reclaiming agency from the authorities who had displaced them. Their responses to exile, however, were philosophically distinct: Su Shi's radical serenity emerged through an expansive acceptance of changing circumstances and the cultivation of inner freedom, whereas Dante's response was grounded more explicitly in divine justice, providence, and the hope of an ultimate spiritual home. Their contrasting responses thus reveal two distinct ways in which geographical displacement can be transformed into a source of intellectual, spiritual, and creative freedom.

7.2. Modalities of Defiance

Immanent Acceptance vs. Prophetic Judgment: The core divergence between Su Shi and Dante lies in how each author confronted the state authority that banished them:

7.3. Su Shi's Immanent Defiance

Su Shi's defiance was quiet, inward, and expressed primarily through the manner in which he inhabited the conditions of exile. Drawing upon resources associated with Confucian ethical responsibility, Daoist natural spontaneity (*ziran*), and Chan-inflected non-attachment, he refused to allow imperial authority to determine his inner worth or his capacity for happiness. Rather than responding to the Song court through direct ideological confrontation, he transformed the conditions of banishment through every day practices of living, writing, cultivation, friendship, and contemplation.

At Huangzhou, for example, farming, observing the natural landscape, sharing simple pleasures, and composing poetry became ways of reconstructing a meaningful life outside the structures of official power. His defiance therefore lay not in denying his political circumstances but in refusing to allow those circumstances to define the value of his existence. Even in Hainan, one of the most remote geographical and cultural margins of the Song Empire, Su Shi continued to adapt, create, and cultivate relationships with his surroundings. His *kuangda*, an expansive and resilient disposition in the face of adversity, thus became a form of existential resistance. The state could control his official position and determine where his body would live, but it could not fully determine how he would inhabit that place, what meaning he would give to his circumstances, or whether his spirit would remain free.

7.4. Dante's Prophetic Defiance

Dante's defiance, by contrast, was prophetic, morally confrontational, and directed toward the political and spiritual structures that he believed had fallen into corruption. Drawing upon Scholastic theology, Roman political thought, and Christian eschatology, he interpreted his exile not simply as a personal misfortune but as part of a wider crisis of justice and moral order

in Florence and the Christian world. Rather than adapting himself quietly to the margins, Dante transformed his displacement into a position from which he could critically reassess the authorities that had excluded him. Describing himself as having become 'a party unto himself' (*a te stesso fatta parte*), he fashioned the *Commedia* as an alternative moral geography in which earthly rulers, religious authorities, and civic leaders are judged according to a higher standard of divine justice.

Popes, monarchs, and Florentine political figures appear within *Inferno* (Hell) and the other realms of the afterlife not because Dante simply seeks personal revenge, but because their actions are measured against an order of justice that transcends temporal political power. His defiance is therefore an act of radical re-centering: Florence no longer occupies the position of ultimate authority in determining his identity or moral worth. The exiled poet instead claims a new position from which he can judge the earthly political order according to a higher conception of justice. In this sense, Dante transforms political exclusion into prophetic authority, turning the voice of the banished citizen into a voice capable of challenging the moral legitimacy of the powers that banished him.

8. Spatial Re-orientation

8.1. Dissolving the Periphery vs. Remapping the Cosmos

Su Shi conceptualized the geography of banishment as fluid, permeable, and capable of transformation through lived experience. Rather than accepting the conventional hierarchy that positioned the political and cultural center of the empire against its distant and supposedly marginal peripheries, he gradually redefined the meaning of place through his engagement with the landscapes and communities in which he was exiled. At Huangzhou and later in Hainan, he discovered intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual value in environments that imperial ideology regarded as peripheral. His poetry transforms rivers, mountains, cultivated fields, local customs, and ordinary human encounters into meaningful spaces of habitation, creativity, and belonging. In this reorientation, 'home' becomes less a fixed geographical location than a condition produced through perception, memory, relationship, and inner freedom. By investing the landscapes of exile with aesthetic and spiritual significance, Su Shi weakened the hierarchy between center and margin: the geographical periphery imposed upon him as punishment could become a lived center of creativity, contemplation, and belonging. This study describes this process as Horizontal Dissolution; the gradual erosion of the spatial hierarchy between center and periphery through the exile's active reappropriation of place. Su Shi does not conquer the political center or construct an alternative empire; rather, he renders the distinction between center and periphery less decisive in the sphere of lived experience. His spatial re-orientation therefore turns banishment from a condition of marginality into an opportunity for inhabiting the world on his own terms. Vertical Reconstruction (Dante): For Dante, geography retained a strongly hierarchical and vertical character. His physical wandering through the fragmented political territories of northern and central Italy

became an enduring experience of homelessness, dependence, and uncertainty, captured memorably in *Paradiso* XVII through the image of ‘the salty taste of another’s bread’ and the difficulty of ‘going up and down another’s stairs.’ Yet Dante did not respond to this displacement by dissolving the distinction between center and periphery. Instead, he reoriented geographical space within a larger Christian cosmology in which earthly locations acquired meaning according to their position within a divinely ordered universe.

The landscapes, cities, and political communities encountered in his experience of exile became imaginative material for the spiritual architecture of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Through this transformation, physical wandering becomes a journey through moral and spiritual space: descent into the depths of sin, ascent through purification, and finally movement toward the divine presence. Dante thus transcends the terrestrial geography that had excluded him and constructs a higher order of belonging culminating in the heavenly Jerusalem. His strategy may therefore be understood as Vertical Reconstruction: rather than dissolving the hierarchy between center and periphery, he relocates the question of belonging within a transcendent hierarchy in which earthly political authority is subordinated to divine justice.

9. Synthesis

9.1. Convergent Serenity Through Divergent Paths

Despite their profound philosophical, religious, and cultural differences, Su Shi and Dante converge on a significant insight: political banishment, although imposed as a form of exclusion and punishment, can be transformed into a condition of intellectual, moral, and creative freedom. Neither writer allowed the loss of political position or geographical belonging to determine the ultimate meaning of his life. Exile removed them from the institutions, privileges, and social structures through which they had previously exercised public influence, but it also created a distance from the immediate pressures of political life. In Su Shi’s case, this altered relationship between lived experience and artistic creation is particularly evident in the intimate connection between his poetry, painting, calligraphy, and everyday life. As Egan demonstrates, Su Shi’s literary and artistic practice cannot be separated from the ways in which he interpreted and represented his changing circumstances [11]. His creative activity thus became a means of transforming lived experience into intellectual and aesthetic expression.

Dante similarly transformed the experience of political displacement into an expansive literary and moral vision through the *Commedia*. Their paths toward serenity, however, remained fundamentally different. Su Shi cultivated an expansive acceptance of changing circumstances, drawing upon natural spontaneity, non-attachment, and an ability to discover meaning in the ordinary world around him. Dante, by contrast, grounded his response in faith in divine justice and transformed earthly displacement into a spiritual pilgrimage toward a transcendent order. Their *Geographies of Banishment* therefore reveal a paradox: the political power that sought to marginalize them could control their physical location but could not fully control the meanings they

created from that displacement. Through poetry, reflection, and moral self-fashioning, both transformed exile from a condition of imposed marginality into a source of intellectual and spiritual agency. Their achievement lies not in escaping displacement, but in demonstrating that the human imagination can transform the geography of exclusion into a geography of freedom.

10. Conclusion

10.1. The Sovereign Self in Banishment

The geographies of banishment constructed by Su Shi and Dante Alighieri demonstrate that exile is more than a historical trauma or a condition of physical displacement; it can become a profound existential and creative experience through which the self is reconstituted. When political authorities removed these writers from the centers in which they had established their civic identities, Su Shi from the imperial world of Song China and Dante from Florence, their banishment sought to diminish their political agency and sever their connection with established communities. Yet neither writer allowed geographical exclusion to become an intellectual or spiritual defeat. Instead, both transformed the experience of displacement into literary and philosophical creation that transcended the immediate circumstances of their punishment. Their works reveal that political authority may control the location of the body, but it cannot completely determine the meanings through which the displaced subject understands the self, the world, and the future.

The comparison further demonstrates that Quiet Defiance and Radical Serenity can operate as complementary modes of intellectual survival, while Creative Sovereignty provides the means through which both writers transform imposed spaces into meaningful ones. Su Shi pursued an immanent path: through *kuangda*, natural spontaneity (*ziran*), non-attachment, and ethical responsibility, he reinhabited the geographical margins of Huangzhou and Hainan as spaces of creativity, contemplation, and everyday joy. His *Horizontal Dissolution* weakened the opposition between political center and geographical periphery by making the place of exile a lived center of belonging. Dante followed a more transcendent path. Through the *Commedia*, he transformed physical homelessness into a spiritual and moral pilgrimage and reconstructed earthly geography within a larger cosmic order of divine justice. His *Vertical Reconstruction* relocated ultimate belonging beyond the authority of Florence and the unstable structures of earthly politics. Thus, although Su Shi and Dante followed profoundly different philosophical and religious paths, both demonstrate the capacity of the human subject to reclaim agency through poetic imagination, moral integrity, and the reconfiguration of space. Their *Geographies of Banishment* ultimately suggest that exile need not have the final word: the political center may determine where a person is placed, but the sovereign self retains the power to determine how that place is inhabited, interpreted, and transformed.

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Statement on Financial Non-Benefit and Independence

The author, Dr. P.R. Chandra Reddy explicitly states that there are no financial gains, commercial benefits, or proprietary interests associated with this article, titled ‘Geographies of Banishment: Quiet Defiance and Radical Serenity in Su Shi and Dante Alighieri’ with anyone. This article was written entirely without external financial support, grants, or sponsorship. The authorship and submission of this manuscript are driven solely by academic merit and intellectual inquiry and distribution, independent of any financial considerations or monetary incentives [12,13].

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