

Current Books

impulses that fall under the heading of postmodernism. Many of the ideas and devices associated with postmodernism were actually part of modernism, such as collage (dating back to cubism) and the use of mass media (dating back to futurism). In this sense Cunningham, who, in 1989, at age 70, became the first modern dancer to use computer imaging, is both a modernist and a postmodernist.

Cunningham's distinctive way of working produced many beauties, not least because his dancers were so virtuosic. Copeland is at his eloquent best when defending the sheer aesthetic power of this "modernized" modern dance. Unfortunately, he also feels obliged to defend Cunningham against critics who fault him for insufficient political engagement. Apparently, it's not enough to create works of grace, clarity, and intelligence; the artist must also liberate human perception, illuminate the future of technology, reconcile the human soul with the fragmented universe, and dispense wisdom in the wake of 9/11. So intent is Copeland on crediting Cunningham with that menu of accomplishments, he accepts the postmodernist maxim that an art of feeling is no longer possible because our psyches have been fatally "conditioned" by advertising and corporate-controlled media.

Of course, as Copeland points out, this postmodernist distrust of emotion does not extend to identity politics, in which issues of race and gender provide a pretext for dancers to wallow in depths of subjectivity unplumbed even by Graham. Distaste for such excesses is no doubt what drives Copeland to place so much emphasis on the "icy" aspect of Cunningham. But as this fascinating book also shows, it takes emotional maturity, even wisdom, to create an art that is deadpan without being dead, cool without being cold. Surely this will be the true legacy of Merce Cunningham.

—MARTHA BAYLES

DANTE IN LOVE: *The World's Greatest Poem and How It Made History.*

By Harriet Rubin. Simon & Schuster.
274 pp. \$23.95

With an approach that is at once historical and incantatory, Harriet Rubin, author of *The Princess: Machiavelli for Women* (1998),

matches the notoriously meager facts of Dante Alighieri's life to his composition of the *Divine Comedy*. In 1302, age 37, Dante—a statesman and a relatively unknown poet—was banished from his home in Florence because of a factional feud. He spent the remaining 19 years of his life on an endless journey and never returned to Florence.

Exile was an agony. Cities were walled and unwelcoming, the paths between them dangerous, and much of Italy without a common language. "The dialects were fiercely different, sometimes from city to city, sometimes from neighborhood to neighborhood," writes Rubin. The grace of Dante's Florentine tongue, which had won him power and influence at home, was worthless.

Early in his wanderings, he decided that "we are all exiles" from God. His journey became allegory, and the *Comedy* began to take shape. In Paris, the astounding cathedrals of the High Middle Ages—these "books in stone," with their ornate architecture climbing into the sky—provided a model for his work. Ravenna, Italy, where exile was sweetened by a comfortable home, helped him imagine an earthly paradise. But it was the dialects of exile that exerted the greatest impact. They encouraged Dante to create a new language, at once literary and broadly accessible. The *Comedy*, the first major work written in this "illustrious vulgar," would change the trajectory of literature, paving the way for vernacular authors from Chaucer to Whitman.

But what's love got to do with it? Yes, Dante loved Beatrice—a well-to-do Florentine who became "the goddess of [his] imagination"—but she had died a dozen years before his banishment. His enduring devotion to her, Rubin contends, is what induced Dante to write. This weak echo of *Shakespeare in Love*, in which only Gwyneth Paltrow can inspire the Bard to finish *Romeo and Juliet*, is hardly as compelling as Rubin's taut reading of the influence of exile on the *Comedy*.

The real love here is Rubin's passion for Dante. She follows him relentlessly and imagines what he saw, from the "hallucinatory sputter of a monastery candle" to his beatific vision of paradise. Combined with her erudition and wit, this love makes Rubin a trustworthy Virgil to guide us through Dante's exile.

—NICHOLAS HENGEN