

BBC Radio 4 - Dante 2021 -

Dante's Paradise

Dante is not a dusty, inaccessible poet because, if you notice, he reflects the concerns of our modern world. In the Divine Comedy, Dante is writing about his journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. In Hell and Purgatory he is guided by Virgil, in Paradise by Beatrice (once his earthly love and now his spiritual guide).

Vittorio Montemaggi (Lecturer in Religion and Art at King's College London), says that one of the things which attracts us most to Dante's work is the journey towards seeing God where we recognize the divinity in all of us.

What does Dante mean to the Italian society?

Vittorio Montemaggi tells us that he got to know Dante thanks to his grandmother, who attended only primary school, so she didn't have an academic study of Dante, but she knew the lines of the Poet by heart. In conclusion, we can say that the Poet is a living presence in Italy.

***“La gloria di colui che tutto move
per l'universo penetra, e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.”***

In these opening lines, Dante is basically saying that he went on an extraordinary journey and now he wants us to know about it. GLORY is the key word and it refers to resplendence of living presence. By the end of the poem, Dante will refer to that same Glory, but he will now call it LOVE (“l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle”).

From the beginning of Paradise he tells us that love is everywhere and it is the fabric of reality.

Why should we read “Paradiso”?

Because it's all about love and justice. He emphasises the relationship between love and justice. We tend to think about love and justice as two separate things, but for the Poet they coincide. Justice is the virtue by which we treat others and it coincides with love because what we most fundamentally owe to others is love. But, who decides what is the correct type of justice? If you have a religious belief you surely say God, but if you do not have a belief, it leaves you wondering.

Faty Mactishava (teacher from University of Maryland) is interested in similarities and differences between Dante and his contemporary Rumi, a Persian poet.

“Actually, I identify myself as a muslim scholar so how do I feel about the fact that these people, who are the greatest symbols of my religion are in Hell? They are identified as beyond being saved.

Do I hold it against Dante in the sense that his divide is a great, mystical dimension? No, it doesn't, because I never thought for a single moment that I should believe that...

I am also aware of the tradition that Rumi and Dante are rooted in. Address others with the big "O" like the One who's not from your community, who's not from your faith. These traditions treat the Other differently and that has multiple reasons: geographically, for example, Rumi lived in the city of Konya, a cosmopolitan city, where people spoke Greek, Turkish, Persian and Arabic too. So the "other" was very colorful, diverse, in some ways very positive and I don't think we can say that Dante was exposed to the same level of diversity, of culture and religion as Rumi. One of the ideas that Dante and Rumi share is that love and God are the same force and universe. They really view it as a force of goodness to the extent that we can open ourselves up to it. We will be capable of receiving it. Rumi uses a beautiful metaphor: "God is like the sunshine, he shines on everyone" and he says "if you don't feel that, just take off some of the layers from the clothes you are wearing, some of your fears and doubts and you're gonna feel the force of goodness".

Vittorio Montemaggi brings the conversation back to Dante and Beatrice.

Dante ran a journey. Where are they going? Dante and Beatrice are heading towards the outermost reaches of the cosmos. Dante imagines a cosmos with the Earth at the centre and 9 concentric Heavens, after all those items there is the Imperium beyond space and time. At a certain point, on the route to Heaven, Dante is invited by Beatrice to look back at the trip they have done and he sees all of the planetary spheres and far beyond there is Earth.

Dante could be compared to one of the astronauts of the Apollo mission in 1968 who's looking at the Earth from above, but he is Dante, he lived in the 14th century, he never went to space, he just had a very vivid imagination. He is an incredible writer and poet.

The meaning of Paradise is about love, the importance of individuals, but also getting away from individualism.

Now we can have a look at the architecture of the three books. Dante, at the end of every Cantica, says the word "stelle", stars.

At the end of the three cantiche we have stars but they are used slightly differently.

" E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle."

At the end of the Inferno, we left hell, we exited hell and once again we saw the stars = sense of open space.

"...puro e disposto a salire a le stelle."

At the end of Purgatory, he says that he is ready not to just see the stars but to ascend to the stars.

"...l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle."

At the end of the Paradise he is fully at one with the love that moves the sun and the other stars = progression to the stars.

When Dante takes his last look at the Earth, Beatrice smiles. He is struggling with the beauty of her smile and he can't describe it to the readers. Beatrice smiles again, because Dante has seen Christ, but there is also something profoundly human. Dante is struck by Beatrice's beauty and he says that his sacred poem needs a pause ("I am blocked as a poet and I need to jump, dear reader, you have to excuse me, but I cannot describe the smile"). The way he writes about that suggests that this is what writing about Paradise is, not writing about abstruse things, it's about being really overwhelmed by someone's smile ([link stars/smile](#)). It is also meaningful to speak about the smile of the universe, just before he is united with the love that moves the sun and the other stars, Dante refers to God, the Trinity, as a smile: what is God like? He is the inter-relationship of a smile .

So, why should we read Paradise? To understand our place in the cosmos, to admit that sometimes we all make mistakes, to be open and humble, to give us hope, to smile often and to recognise that each and every one of us has a bit of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven within us.

Giulia Fantino e Sara Paravan