

DANTE, POET OF THE DECOLONISED WORLD: REFLECTIONS ON A FIELD AND ITS HORIZONS

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I have been celebrating of late. I have just begun a position that I have long dreamed of, as Assistant Professor of Italian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and the possibilities seem endless. Such moments are inevitably cause for reflection, both of a personal nature and with regard to the field that I have been part of for almost a decade. As a *dantista*, I have pushed in the direction of thinking beyond the confines of reading the *Commedia* exclusively through the lens of medieval theology, monolithic Italian identity, and, broadly speaking, Western culture. This has not been without resistance, but it remains a cause that I am committed to and a vision that I believe we must advocate for in the strongest possible terms.

Of late, my formulation for this approach has taken the form of this expression: Dante, Poet of the Decolonised World. In a forthcoming essay in the volume *Migrants Shaping Europe, Past and Present* (Manchester University Press, 2022), I elaborate upon this formulation as a fusion of two modes. The first is Erich Auerbach's *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*, a book first published in German in 1929 that makes the case for Dante as a great realist author in whose work "the confusion of earthly affairs is not concealed or attenuated or immaterialized" (Auerbach, 2007:133). The second stems from Teodolinda Barolini's *Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*, which posits detheologising as a form of reading "that attempts to break out of the hermeneutic guidelines that Dante has structured into his poem, hermeneutic guidelines that result in theologised readings whose outcome has been overdetermined by the author" (Barolini, 1992:17). As Auerbach draws attention to Dante's realism and Barolini seeks to detheologise the 'poema sacro', I hold that decolonising Dante means opening our

reading of the poem to global and cross-cultural currents in its moment and in our own.

In the essay mentioned above, I have sought to embody this mode by reading Dante in concert with the Arab poet of medieval Sicily, Ibn Hamdīs, thinking beyond the overly romanticised notion of poet in exile and instead considering the more grounded transhistorical phenomena of migration and refugee status. Such a perspective allows for a different Dante to emerge, and a different, more nuanced idea of medieval Italy as well. What happens when we consider Ibn Hamdīs as an Italian poet, as Valerio Magrelli did in including his poetry in his 2015 anthology *Millennium poetry: viaggio sentimentale nella poesia italiana*? How might such a perspective enhance our reading of that stunning moment at the end of *Purgatorio* 4, when home is referred to not with any Italian toponym but instead as Morocco, a place on the other side of the Mediterranean?

The round table series that provoked this special issue was a joy to behold. Scholars were gathered to provide wonderful perspectives on issues of diversity and decolonisation in a field that has been needing it. In the discussion following my panel, though, it was pointed out that I was the only person in this series speaking about a premodern subject. This is not atypical, on either side of this model that divides fields by historical period, but I want to emphasise that considerations of cultural difference, colonial thought, migration, and the like cannot be confined to modernity alone. There is so much that we have to gain in extending such approaches and interests to the more distant past. Decolonising and undoing the monolithic nation is, in many ways, best accomplished by going back to a time before the nation and radically complicating its founding myths. And this is particularly necessary in a moment when the European Middle Ages have been co-opted by white nationalists who seek to celebrate the period as an idealised version of their vision. In the Italian context, we need look no further than Matteo Salvini declaiming the verses of *Inferno* 28 describing Muhammad in a 2016 speech to justify his own anti-immigrant Islamophobia.

In closing, I want to reflect upon two ways in which we can expand our global approach to Dante. The first is through adopting the perspective of the Global Middle Ages. In an essay that came out last year, I read Dante through the lens of his contemporary Indian poet Amīr Khusrau, not in the vein of source study, but rather as a form of

reading that asks us to consider the ties that bind these poets together, such as vernacular experimentation, spice trade, and gender-bending (Kumar, 2021). The second is in the form of global reception. I've been thinking recently about Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison and her 21st-century rewritings of select canti of the *Commedia* in which she, as Jason Allen-Paisant puts it, "overtly presents herself as a new Dante" (Allen-Paisant, 2021:678). In her version of *Inferno* 1, Goodison's guide, the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, adapts Virgil's exclusion from paradise in a most telling way:

[...] the ruler /
of the higher heights above, forbids that I who rebelled /
against all forms of hierarchy and divisions of class and
race /
should approach unto that elevated state of grace.
(Goodison, 2017:561-62)

Goodison stunningly expands upon Virgil's 'rebellion' as a non-Christian poet to rail against divisions of class and race, drawing us to reflect upon the work of decolonising that remains. Such a move should also provoke us to consider how Dante himself links the problem of Virgil's exclusion to the cultural other when he questions the justice of exclusion in *Paradiso* 19 and specifically names Indians, Ethiopians, and Persians as groups that challenge the narrow definition of worth and excellence based solely in the orthodox.

References

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