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‘Dante: Inferno to Paradise’ Review: A Divine PBS Documentary

Combining expert commentary and artful dramatizations, Ric Burns’s two-part film traces Dante’s life and towering literary achievement.

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An 1870 engraving of a scene from Dante by Gustave Doré PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

In 1321, the leading citizens of Ravenna, Italy, carried Dante's body to his grave, far from his native Florence, from which he had been exiled for years. Left behind was one of the modern world's wonders, "The Divine Comedy," completed shortly before his death and a spur to readers from his time to now. Ric Burns's new two-part PBS documentary on the poem is beautifully executed and collaborative in spirit. "Dante: Inferno to Paradise" appeals to lovers of art and anyone wondering what all the fuss is about with Dante.

Born in 1265, Dante started life aspiring to artistic excellence, philosophical wisdom and political service. As a boy, he was struck by the beauty of Beatrice Portinari, a young girl who would inspire his poetry before her untimely death in 1290. After her passing, he continued to write, study, and serve Florence. Banished by a rival faction in 1301, he entered the road of exile and never returned. He composed "The Divine Comedy"—beginning in a dark wood and ending with a vision of the Trinity and a glimpse of Christ—over the last 15 years of his life. Who knew then that his vernacular poetry and his radical vision would prove so revolutionary for modern Italian literature?

The film opens with Dante's early life and the indispensable backstory of "The Divine Comedy," that midlife crisis for the ages. Dante's Florence comes to life here, as do his education, political passions and encounter with Beatrice, whose beauty fires his poetic vocation. With help from scholars and commentators such as Lino Pertile and Heather Webb, the film provides a much-needed service: It reveals the political drama leading to Dante's exile from Florence and, eventually, to "The Divine Comedy." While some lament all the Italian politics in Dante, this film compellingly shows the connection between his life and his writing.

It also puts forward Dante's artistic response to the injustice, anxiety and pain of exile as a powerful alternative to violence, resentment or revenge. The film argues that Dante's life reveals his gradual discovery of how we all too often live—in sin and error—and how we ought to live. Dante's poem rises like a star from his experience, reminding viewers that "your life matters—take care of it," in the film's final words.

Featuring a winning combination of live acting, sweeping camera shots and vivid artistic imagery, Mr. Burns's documentary leads viewers through the three parts of "The Divine Comedy." Antonio Fazzini (Dante), Fattori Fraser (Beatrice), Dikran Tulaine (Virgil) and other talented actors help bring the story to new life.

Necessarily selective with the long poem, Mr. Burns highlights Dante's relationship with Beatrice and his encounters with famous souls, beginning with Virgil, his mentor and guide. In "Inferno," the film focuses on Dante's struggles as he encounters the lust of Francesca, the political gluttony of Ciaccio, the dangerous

loves of Ulysses and the cannibalistic violence of Ugolino. As one commentator explains, the force of each encounter in hell is to leave the reader alone “with yourself for a moment,” free to reflect, or tremble, or change.

In the section on “Purgatorio,” Mr. Burns introduces viewers to the most human and beautiful part of the poem. Here the film reveals fully the liturgical context of Dante’s journey—stretching from Good Friday to the week following Easter in April 1300—and suggests how time begins again for him with hope and grace after his harrowing descent into hell. One of Dante’s first encounters with a purgatorial soul, Manfred (Matthew Sanders), is powerfully acted and reveals the strength of divine mercy. “There is no one so lost,” Dante learns, “that eternal love cannot return, as long as hope shows something green.”

Imagined as an ascent up a seven-story mountain, “Purgatorio” is an artistic and penitential experience. Ascending souls are purged of any lingering inclination to the deadly sins and so are prepared for paradise. The film argues that “Purgatorio” reveals a central tension in human life: between what we are at our worst moments and what we aspire to be. Atop the mountain, the film lavishes attention on the sorrowful departure of Virgil and the most important moment in the poem thus far: Dante’s reunion with Beatrice, and his humbling recognition and confession that he had “followed counterfeits of goodness,” and ought to have cultivated his life and loves better.

As the film turns to “Purgatorio,” Mr. Burns again illuminates the spiritual and political tensions in Italy and Europe. The film movingly depicts how the door of Dante’s earthly hopes—returning home to Florence—finally closes forever. Attention is also given to the beautiful mosaics of Ravenna, which may have inspired the author, and to the significance of the Baptistery in Florence, where he longed to be crowned a poet upon his return from exile.

The “Paradiso” section takes up the challenge of sharing Dante’s final journey through the heavens to God. The film dramatizes well Dante’s encounter with his ancestor, Cacciaguida, who urges Dante to speak and write fully, without holding back or being timid. His poetry is to appeal to our conscience and to offer “living nourishment.” Dante is called to prove himself a “friend of truth.” The film ends with the fascinating story of the last 13 cantos of “Paradiso,” the ending of the poem itself, and an account of Dante’s legacy.

When the film ends, viewers may be moved to make Dante’s journey for themselves. Those who do will discover the full glorious humanism of this “son of hope” and “son of grace,” as he is called in “Paradiso.”

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