

Daunted by Dante?

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If Dante's Divine Comedy is not your idea of a beach read, you may be interested in the book Nick reviews this month.

Daunted by Dante?

A busy person's shortcut through great literature of the afterlife

An expert on Dante is ipso facto an expert on the afterlife, or at least on Western imaginings of the afterlife. Undiscovered Country, from a scholar who has spent decades studying the 13th century Florentine poet, may be about, as the subtitle suggests, "the world to come", but it is seen through the lens of The Divine Comedy, Dante's master-work of thousands of lines over three books, which stands as Western literature's greatest attempt at describing the hereafter. If the reader is daunted by Dante, then Hawkins' small but considered book may be a way in to the sheer bulk of The Divine Comedy, providing a general overview and illuminating snippets that give a flavor of the whole. It also provides a quick snap-shot of what we do and don't know, and what over the centuries Christians have imagined about the afterlife.

Dante believes that we will not share the same reward or punishment; therefore the different ways that we spend the afterlife necessarily provide the itinerary for Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. The structure of the three books would suggest location is paramount, but the focus of the Comedy is really the people that Dante and his guides encounter. While some critics emphasise Dante's theology, Harold Bloom in typically bombastic fashion suggests that this focus on humanity (particularly in the romantic figure of Beatrice) rather than God is audaciously subversive.

In any case, Dante's Hell (Inferno) reflects the ways we spend our lives here and now—; the punishment fits the crime. Hawkins suggests that Dante's Hell is simply a vision of what the world descends to without God. Our idea of Hell as a place like the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, where sinners get their come-uppance with no respite, may suit our sense of justice, but the key aspect of Hell is the absence of God, something that Pope John Paul II probably had in mind when he instructed the faithful to think of Hell as a condition rather than a location.

The second book of the Comedy (a term that reflects its literary genre as a piece that moves from bad to good, as opposed to tragedy which moves from good to bad) deals with purgatory, a concept that is particularly problematic for Protestant Christians, partly because there is no biblical basis for it, and partly because it negates the effects of grace. Hawkins writes of it as invention and calls Pope Innocent IV's assertion that purgatory is confirmed by the Church Fathers "a stretch". Yet he says that it "made sense" in a way, as one should need to be "purged" to be in God's presence. This is, by the way, reflected beautifully in Dante's lines about the twisting road of purgatory straightening out twisted souls. Hawkins prefers to think of purgatory as standing for a way of living this life. Unlike Bloom, Hawkins sees Beatrice (the love of Dante's life who takes over from Virgil as his guide) as a Christ-like figure who, rather than subverting the Christian message, teaches us that loving is the means by which we progress towards Heaven.

Unlike the cartoon version, Dante's Heaven is beyond the clouds, in the realm of the stars, appropriately, as here Dante excels in his use of light as a metaphor for God and Heaven. This is a reason Umberto Eco likes Paradiso, in contrast to, Hawkins says, most readers, who find Paradiso the hardest going. Heaven too is a meritocracy. While all are contented (and joyful), some have more than others. Here Dante is backed up by Saint Augustine ("there will be such distinction"), but this seems to me to run contrary to Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyard, though of course we have no way of knowing for sure.

As the title (taken from Hamlet) suggests, while we have a sure and certain hope, the afterlife is as yet undiscovered and so is indeed hoped for rather than known. Hawkins is expansive on Dante, but emphasizes that we must be cautious in talking about the afterlife as there is so little evidence to go on. It must be spoken of with "theological imagination". While Hawkins writes that focusing on the here-and-now because that is all we know has a certain appeal, he says that ultimately it is uninteresting and not sustaining. A sure and certain hope should give joy to this life and, besides, having a healthy attitude to the after-life is a counter to avoiding thinking about death, that chronic problem in our society that accounts for both hedonism and despair.

Whether Dante's Paradise is about its location, its inhabitants, or Dante himself, about the only thing regarding the real Heaven we can be sure of is that we will be near to God. Dante, it seems, understood this to a certain degree. Jamie McKendrick wrote recently in the London Review of Books that for Dante, "doing belongs to the earthly realm, being to heaven". What being near to God entails, Hawkins suggests, will ultimately be a surprise, and his book makes it clear we should savour that.

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