

## ORATION

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ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONFERMENT OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LITERATURE (HONORIS CAUSA) TO ROBERTO BENIGNI

There is only one Charles Chaplin, one Buster Keaton, one Stanley Laurel and one Oliver Hardy, one Totò. And there is only one Roberto Benigni. This oration is a tribute to a unique artist who enables us to suspend our disbelief and draws us into a fantasy world where everything is dreadful and everything is joyous, where everything is sad and everything is funny or, as Luigi Pirandello would have put it, where everything is fable and everything is true. In what follows I hope to do justice to the unequalled inventiveness and range of virtuosity of the art of Benigni, whose oxymoronic genius makes us laugh till we cry, and cry till we laugh. Benigni, quite simply, has understood the true meaning of the duality and variegatedness of comedy in filmmaking, in literature, and in the humanities generally, and a greater appreciation of his work must acknowledge his intuitive affinities with Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

That comedy encompasses pain – though ultimately, it always suggests a transcendence of adversity and a joyous celebration of life – is the great lesson that Benigni draws from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In an “imaginary letter” to “Mr Dante Alighieri,” Benigni places the Florentine poet in the First Terrace of the Holy Mount of Purgatory together with the souls engaged in purging themselves of the sin of pride, Dante's self-acknowledged sin. With his typically oxymoronic dose of tongue-in-cheek playfulness and deep reverence, Benigni thanks Dante for having taught him the startling doubleness of the paradox of life. Benigni tells Dante: “It was you who made me experience both good and evil, made me go to sleep frightened out of my wits, moved me to tears .... And it was you who made me die of laughter....” Balanced on a precariously narrow and shifting threshold between tears and laughter, Benigni's verbal and visual humour lives within the same type of duality he discerns in Dante, whose *Comedy* derives its shaping features from the contradictory nature of life itself.

Dante, however, taught Benigni more than the paradoxical nature of human life. He also led him to fall in love with poetry, with its unfathomable mysteries, and with its voice. And the debt has been most handsomely paid. There is no greater tribute that Benigni could have paid Dante for having communicated to him the awe-inspiring experience

of poetry at its most sublime than his explication and recitation of the *Comedy*. In paying tribute to Dante in the public squares of Italy and in the virtual public squares that his appearances on television make so real and immediate, Benigni's contribution has been simply inestimable in helping renew an oral tradition which has illustrious origins. The *Lectura Dantis* is a tradition inaugurated by no less than Giovanni Boccaccio, who gave a series of public lectures commissioned by the Florentine Commune in the Church of Santo Stefano in Badia between 1373 and 1374. What better words can describe Benigni's legacy in the revival of such a tradition than those uttered by the eminent Dante scholar Robert Hollander, who is with us today to share this memorable occasion. This is what Hollander has to say about Benigni: "He has lectured on the poet to three-quarters of a million people in the past two years alone. Each of his lectures concludes with a memorable and moving recitation of a canto of the *Commedia*. He is rebuilding an audience for this great poem, which has been too much forgotten, and is as relevant today as it was more than seven hundred years ago, when it was begun."

"Too much forgotten." Hollander's words succinctly describe the plight not only of the *Comedy* but of poetry itself. The novelist Arnold Bennett said more than a century ago that the word "poetry" is capable of dispersing a crowd faster than a fire hose, and it is a sad truth that indifference and incomprehension in regard to poetry have depopulated the very spaces where poetry seeks to house itself. This is why it is wonderful to see a crowd like this today, assembled to celebrate poetry rather than be dispersed by it. Benigni has rescued poetry from the unfortunate and quite mistaken perception that it is the most useless and most obscure of the arts, and with unashamed joyousness, he has brought it back to our consciousness. His *terzina-by-terzina* commentary provides the audience with a clarification of Dante's verse that is as incisive as it is sensitive, while evoking a mode of thinking that is at once literal and transliteral or, to use Tzvetan Todorov's words, "at once verbal and transverbal." And, as we know, Benigni does all that with an innate sense of theatre and of just the right modulation of tone and mood, and with the capacity to read the emotions of his audience even while interpreting the sublimity of what he is performing.

For words like Dante's do need a reader to recite them, in solitude or in public: one who understands that poetry is to be understood not only in the mind of the reader but also through the operations of the voice. Benigni knows that verse is inseparable from utterance, and that "the music of poetry is not something which exists apart from the meaning," as T.S.Eliot has put it. In each and every single recitation, Benigni's persona recedes to a point where we can almost believe that we are hearing Dante's own unique and distinctive voice. This is the ultimate

achievement that any reader of Dante can aspire to – indeed, Benigni’s own and unique achievement. This is one of the reasons why there is only one Roberto Benigni.

It is, self-evidently, not the only one. Those of us who have watched Benigni’s *Lecturae Dantis* have been struck by the enormous range, not only of passionate engagement, but of learning, that they encompass. Indeed, we have been struck by the dazzling ability to bring together the most disparate of elements: comedy and tragedy, politics and poetry, medieval literature and television, fairy tales and satire, reality and illusion, evil and innocence, Dante and Pinocchio. There is a telling cue in this juxtaposition of Dante and Pinocchio. The paradoxical and oxymoronic mode of thinking that was to become the artist’s hallmark was already at work in Benigni, the child. Benigni recounts the story of how, when seeing Dante’s statue in front of Santa Croce in Florence for the first time, he thought it was that of Pinocchio: “My mother as a child used to tell me: ‘If you tell lies your nose will become long like Pinocchio’s and then Dante Alighieri will send you to hell!’ Until one day in the square I saw a statue of Dante and that nose made me think he was Pinocchio.”

Allow me therefore at this point to turn to Pinocchio, Dante’s “double.” In Benigni’s profoundly enigmatic realm of the comic there is perhaps nothing more enigmatic than the filmic postscript he appends to the ending of Carlo Collodi’s cautionary tale of initiation into adulthood in his movie *Pinocchio* (2002). The author Pietro Citati contends that Pinocchio actually exists before he is carved into a puppet by Geppetto, who is responsible for materializing the Platonic idea hidden in the piece of wood which miraculously ends up in his hands. In Collodi’s conclusion, however, the Platonic idea dies even as Pinocchio turns human: the puppet is turned into a piece of lifeless wood, and only the reality of a pre-established social hierarchy governed by strict regulations and conventions prevails. Rather than following Collodi’s ending, Benigni takes us by surprise and carries forward the notion that the Platonic idea simply cannot die. Benigni’s film refuses to end as expected, and continues with the haunting image of the puppet’s shadow and a butterfly. The dancing shadow, a rebellious figure that is peripheral to the human image and yet also inextricably bound to it, chases the butterfly, the uncanny symbol of an evanescent object of desire, forever pursued, yet forever out of reach. The oneiric vision with which Benigni ends his version of Collodi’s tale transports us into a fantasy world, beyond the responsibilities demanded by social integration. This is a particularly succinct instance of the way in which the art of Benigni is constantly on the border, striving to penetrate “the unknown realm of the comic,” as Milan Kundera calls it.

Benigni’s postscript to Collodi’s conclusion ends the film on a note of ambiguity, which demands further elaboration within the imagination of

the audience. If Pinocchio's transformation into a compliant boy may be seen as the attempt to placate the subversive element in his relationship with the world, the shadow is a subtle reminder that the apparently happy ending is achieved only through illusion and fabrication: in short, only through a lie. This opposition of truth and falsehood intertwined with the notion of playfulness is also at work within the representation of both the real and the fantastic in Benigni's Oscar-winning masterpiece, *Life is Beautiful* (1997). Ludwig Wittgenstein's contention that comedy is an important form of "play" or "game" which is governed by an understanding of boundaries or limits, and therefore, of the distance that has to be maintained in the treatment of evil in an inherently tragic situation, is relevant to much of Benigni's art and never more so than here. Benigni's comedic talent displays a keen understanding of the crucial concept of boundaries, and *Life is Beautiful* derives its creative force from the ability to establish the right distance from the horrors of the Holocaust at the right moment. A true maestro of the narrative technique of allusion, which operates at a level of invisibility and forms part of the unrepresentable, Benigni is capable of making us imagine a scene without actually showing it to us. What better example of such an ability than those moving last sequences of Guido marching silently to his death in an offscreen space, away from the eyes of his son Giosuè, who is thus shielded from the horrors of the war.

Within the limited space of an oration, it has not been possible to do justice to all the qualities of an artist as immensely versatile as Benigni. The talents which have not been touched upon are numerous: the linguistic skills of his early theatrical monologue, *Cioni Mario di Gaspare fu Giulia* (1975); the rich variety of acrobatic gags and slapstick physical actions of *The Little Devil* (1988) and *The Monster* (1994); the ability to develop a parodic narrative in *Johnny Stecchino* (1991); and the delicate interplay of conflictual emotions in *The Tiger and the Snow* (2005).

In his autobiography, Charles Chaplin wrote that his clowning stems from the awareness that "the theme of life is conflict and pain." This is the same lesson that Benigni also imparts throughout his own multifaceted art, and it is one which he has drawn from his reading of Dante. Indeed, great comedy is always a paradox, and its inherently ambiguous nature poses a dilemma which continues to intrigue us: how can one create laughter out of tragic circumstances? Benigni's realm of the comic constantly strives to provide an answer to such a dilemma. For as Benigni himself observes, "...even in horror there is always the germ of hope, there is something which resists everything, every form of destruction.... Laughter saves us, seeing the other side of things, the surreal or funny side, or being able to imagine it, prevents us from being shattered to pieces, from being carried away like twigs, and helps us fight back and get through the night, even

when it appears to be interminable.” Benigni, indeed, has been unique in placing at the centre of his aesthetic the potential for discerning the comic even within situations which are desperately fraught and tinged by the tragic. Others have visited the theme of melancholy behind jollity, but Benigni’s originality and singularity lies in understanding that the comedy he perceives nestling in the tragic need not model itself on or be solemnly limited by “black humour,” but can afford to be – and sometimes has to courageously be – exuberant and unrestrained and joyous. It takes a very special artist to see that -- and, we must not forget, a daring one too, and that is also one of the attributes which we are honouring today. We deeply thank you, Maestro Roberto Benigni, for having brought to the arts and the *studia humanitatis* a tragicomic genius and an experience of joy, one which has been uniquely able to strengthen our ability to sustain the bearable as well as the unbearable lightness of being, thus winning us over to the view that *la vita e` bella*.

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