

Alessandro Scafi lecturer in medieval and Renaissance cultural history

In 1984, I went with my parents to Rovigo, in northern Italy, to watch my brother sworn in as officer of the Italian financial police, and we visited Verona. In front of Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel, I was stunned by the Christian faith expressed in such a magnificent and consistent visual form.

As the cultural historian Peter Burke put it, culture is a system of shared meanings, attitudes, and values, and I have always been attracted to the symbolic forms in which they are embodied.

I lecture at the Warburg Institute, part of the University of London, and teach MA students and supervise Ph.D. researchers. The Institute stems from the personal library of the Hamburg scholar Aby Warburg, a German Jew interested in the intellectual and social context of Renaissance art. It is a renowned research institute in cultural history, and its library represents all the strands that link medieval and modern civilisation, with its origins in the ancient cultures of the Near East and the Mediterranean. Since 2011, with John Took and Tabitha Tuckett, I've run a series of Dante readings open to all.

Cultural history studies and interprets a historical period in its entirety — its art and literature, economy, and social institutions of daily life. It's a way to visit, comprehend, and respect the foreign country of the past, to understand and act in the present, and prepare for the future.

My job title is "Senior Lecturer in Medieval and Renaissance Cultural History", but my main job is what the Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio put on his passport application in 1919: "Occupation: Man." With Dante Alighieri, I'd acknowledge that the best way to truly be a man is to go beyond being a man. Occupation: *trasmigranare*.

The Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola reported that Abdul the Saracen, an ancient Arabic thinker, was asked what seemed to

him most wonderful on earth. He replied that there was nothing to be seen more marvellous than man. In my own little way, I share this view, and in both my research and teaching I could appreciate what a great miracle is man.

Examining the records and narrative descriptions of past matter, the continuum of events leading from the past to the present — and even into the future — has always surprised me, and I seem to have learnt more about the people involved — and myself — than about the subject itself. And when, as a teacher, I have handed down to students the fruits of my contemplation (to adopt the phrasing of the Dominican motto), I was pleased and surprised to receive back from them a hundred times as much.

I have enjoyed learning — and teaching, in turn — about the complexity of history and its relevance for today, and finding out how true is the Latin dictum that history is the teacher of life. I've always disliked the very human impulse to deify or demonise figures. We need to leave arrogance, and try to understand how and why things happened.

I have enjoyed discovering that the past is as complex as the present. Indeed, that the past is not even past, because — as the American historian

"I am convinced that medieval and Renaissance worlds may tell us who we are today"

and geographer David Lowenthal put it — to be is to have been.

It might be true that to be a Renaissance man was in my youth's dreams and aspirations, but it might be also a little far-fetched to say that I am a Renaissance man myself.

My only Renaissance is now, because now is the only time I have. I



couldn't imagine life without a computer, for example, while medieval and Renaissance minds and sensibilities broaden my sympathies for the present and further motivate my commitment to improving it, or at least to improving my perception of it.

I am convinced that medieval and

no longer seen as an expression of a divine order.

As a child, I felt happy and loved. I was curious and keen to learn, and spent long summer months at the seaside. According to my mother's account, I didn't speak until I was four years old. Since then, she always added, I've never stopped. My primary-school teacher commented that if men are really born poets, then I would become one. He also warned me, however, that *carmina non dant panem*: "poems don't give bread."

Now, the peak of my daily home life is when I tell bedtime stories to Benedetto — my six-year-old child — with princesses, witches, wolves, shells, and dolphins.

As a teenager, I attended a three-day retreat for Easter, following the Exercises of St Ignatius in a monastery in countryside near Rome. I spent two days listening and taking notes, but the rest of the time contemplating the awakening spring and doing my own reading and drawing. I liked the silence and the natural scenery, but I enjoyed think-

ing for myself. I was too curious of the world to detach myself from it.

The urgent task for me was to build my own humanity, not to go beyond it. However, when I took the Exercises seriously, I discovered a joy that set me free.

As a student, I participated in a month-long Jesuit pilgrimage in the Holy Land. I was deeply in love with my first sensual love, and since then I have felt in deep love with both God and the Woman, the story in my forthcoming book. *L'uomo con le radici in cielo*, to be published in January 2022, is not an academic book about Dante, but a kind of confessional account of my own journey through Hell and Purgatory to return to Eden, as Dante did, recovering an original justice, in view of the glory of heaven. I hope it will be translated into English. Its title came from a voice telling me: "I want to see you grounded in heaven."

Still to do? Sailing around the world, writing bestsellers, producing great works of art, but also doing something good for others, why not? *L'uomo con le radici in cielo* is also an account of how a really intense experience completely changed my perspective.

Injustice and imperfection make me angry. Beauty makes me happy.

It always gives me hope for the future when I come across a bright, creative, and fair young person.

I pray to be made able to surrender myself completely to God.

I would choose to be locked in a church with my late mother, as she gave me life and sketched its path on a map of paradise.

Alessandro Scafi was talking to Terence Handley MacMath.

L'uomo con le radici in cielo will be published by Società Editrice Milanese (SEM) in 2022. For Dante readings at the Warburg Institute from October to March 2022, visit: warburg.sas.ac.uk

POET'S CORNER

Malcolm Guite composes new stanzas to the sounds of a bricklayer's trowel

BOTH my reading and my writing these days are accompanied by the intermittent and rather satisfying sound of a bricklayer's trowel, scraping and cleaning, laying out cement; the odd hammering sounds, and chips and chinks, as bricks are trimmed to size; and, weaving in and out of it all, the occasional strains of his favourite classic-rock radio station.

We are having a little garden-dining room added on to the back of our small house, and it has been fascinating to watch how it is made: from the digging and laying of foundations, through the careful layering and gradual growth of the cavity-insulated walls, and now to the laying on of the roof beams. When it is finished, it

will be the first room I have inhabited whose construction I have actually witnessed, and it will be all the richer for that. For all the plain white of the walls within, or the red brick without, I will have some sense, also, of the interior layers, the hidden foundations, the invisible skill and labour that made all this happen.

As I look out at Mark the brickie from my own work at my desk, I sense a certain kinship. As he works on the garden room, I am working on a new stanza for one of my Arthurian poems, which is also, in its own sense, a new room added to the structure of the poem.

As it happens, the word "stanza" is derived from an Italian word, which simply means a room. A poem of several stanzas is, as it were, furnished with a series of rooms, each of which opens on to and contains a little more of the household of the poem: its colours, its characters, its images, and its emblems. Donne is playing on this meaning of stanza when, in the middle line of the middle stanza in "The Good Morrow", he says that love "makes one little room an everywhere".

Looking out from the window of the back room of our house, through the half-finished new room towards the garden, gives a new perspective, a hint of the new windows through

which we will one day gaze, and how the way in which rooms and windows give on to and lead into one another is part of the character of a house. So, too, of a poem.

Think of the eight stanzas, the lovely eight-roomed house, which is the "Ode to a Nightingale". You start in a rather shadowed hallway, drowsy and numb, your heart aching, but soon you have been ushered through to the garden room, and you glimpse outside the "beechen green, and shadows numberless".

The second stanza beckons you to the wine cellar and a vintage "cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth". Then, soothed and refreshed, you're out into the garden itself, amid "the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild". Then, somewhere at the back of the poem, in its penultimate stanza, you come at last to the "magic casements", to those windows, that must open at the back of every poem, on to a mystery beyond words, on to "the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn".

So, as Mark wields his trowel, I wield my pen, both of us hoping to make something capacious, helpful, inviting: something with windows framing a view and opening in new ways on to the world.

COMING SOON

No cure for being human: Kate Bowler interviewed

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A Hymns Ancient & Modern Publication
Printed by Mortons Printers and Publishers,
Newspaper House, Morton Way, Horncastle,
Lincolnshire LN9 6JR; registered as a
newspaper at the Post Office



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