

«LA BONTÀ INFINITA HA SÌ GRAN BRACCIA»

Essays in honour of John J. Kinder

Saggi in onore di John J. Kinder



Edited by / A cura di  
Joshua Brown e Marinella Caruso



Franco Cesati Editore





QUADERNI DELLA RASSEGNA  
256.



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## INDICE

Acknowledgments	p. 9
Paolo D'Achille, <i>Prefazione</i>	p. 11
Joshua Brown - Marinella Caruso, « <i>La bontà infinita ha sì gran braccia</i> ». <i>In honour of John J. Kinder</i>	p. 13
I. ASPECTS OF ITALIAN (LINGUISTIC) HISTORY	
Joshua Brown, <i>The search for the infinite in random episodes of Italian culture</i>	» 19
Andrea Rizzi, « <i>Ch'egli è tutto mio</i> »: <i>Gabriele Simeoni and his Apologia Generale</i> (1559-1560)	» 39
Edoardo Barbieri, <i>Qualche scheda sulla presenza ebraica nell'editoria italiana tra Ottocento e Novecento</i>	» 53
Silvia Morgana, <i>Sulle orme di Manzoni. Le voci toscane vive di Giulio Carcano</i>	» 63
Michele Colombo, <i>A 15<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript with vernacular biblical texts in Uppsala</i>	» 77
Cecilia Robustelli, <i>L'italiano di fronte al "genere": la sfida delle nuove richieste comunicative al sistema della lingua</i>	» 93
Simone Pagnolato, <i>Un inedito studio paremiologico di Franca Ageno fra le carte della Crusca</i>	» 115

## II. ITALY, ITALIAN AND ITALIANS IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

Diana Glenn, *The memory wall: kinship memories of campanian identity and belonging* » 139

Marinella Caruso, "When I do Italian I do it with my heart as well as with my brain". A Q methodology study on vision and motivation of adolescent learners of Italian in Australia » 159

Loretta Baldassar - Emanuela Sala, Tenere salotto on Italian language and the question of culture in Australia » 185

Antonia Rubino, *Heritage language learning experiences and motivation amongst third generation Australian Italians* » 203

John Hajek - Jennifer Baldwin, *A History of Italian at Victoria University of Wellington* » 227

Thomas V. Gourlay, "A gaze full of sympathy and charged with a promise for life": authority, friendship, and the teacher – An aspect of the pedagogical method of Luigi Giussani » 255

Giuseppe Finaldi, 'Je sò pazzo'. The cantautori, madness, and Italy's anni di piombo » 273

Publications of John J. Kinder » 285

I.

ASPECTS OF ITALIAN (LINGUISTIC) HISTORY



JOSHUA BROWN\*

## THE SEARCH FOR THE INFINITE IN RANDOM EPISODES OF ITALIAN CULTURE

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I count myself infinitely fortunate to have been a student of John's, who was my teacher first during my undergraduate years, then Honours dissertation supervisor, and finally an outstanding PhD supervisor. Of the courses of study I undertook across four languages during the early stages of my arrival at The University of Western Australia (UWA), many were taught by specialists in their respective disciplinary areas, often as monographic accounts of particular topics: the post World War 2 German novel, *nouvelle vague* French cinema, Italian Renaissance literature, and so on. John's classes were different. Not only did he reveal the wonders to me of the linguistic feast which characterizes Italy's past and present, but his knowledge of Italian culture writ large as a non-native speaker meant that we students were lucky enough to be exposed to the cultural knowledge of an "outsider" who wondrously (wonderfully!) jumped from Ancient Rome, modern dialects, Italian authors I had never heard of, famous scenes of political life in Italy, idiosyncrasies of the subjunctive, personal anecdotes of his many experiences of Italy, and much, much more. As MAIDEN (1995) says, on the question of the various histories of the Italian language that have appeared (in the *Preface* to his own *A Linguistic History of Italian*), perhaps these things are best essayed by outsiders<sup>2</sup>. Much of

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Marinella Caruso, Maurizio Dardano, and Tom Gourlay for their comments and discussions on this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> MAIDEN 1995: XV: «It is a curious observation that structural histories of Italian of the kind offered in this book have generally been executed by non-Italians. We find, for example, a German (Rohlf), a Swiss (Meyer-Lübke), a Pole (Manczak), a Hungarian (Fogarasi) and a Croatian (Tekavčić). Perhaps it is the case that such histories are best essayed by outsiders, who are less acutely sensitive to (but not necessarily any less aware of) the complex social and cultural milieux in which the language lives and from which the linguistic facts have to be brutally extirpated».

this cultural knowledge, native speakers appeared to take for granted, or perhaps they did not presume it interesting enough to pass on to non-native students. But these were the cultural riches I was looking for. John had the ‘key’ to understand Italy in *all its facets*<sup>3</sup>. John’s teaching *offered a whole approach*, one that did not attempt to *divide Italy up into bits*. I found this way of approaching things very new. It was (and remains) a fascinating method to see things afresh. The gratitude I have for his example will last forever. Now, I have also received the grace to teach in the same university where he once taught me, and my only hope is to continue his example in his likeness to new generations of students.

The aim of this chapter is to discern evidence of mankind’s perennial search for the infinite in random episodes of Italian language and art. While this search is present in contemporary societies and at all times in a historical sense, the infinite makes itself felt acutely in various ways in Italian culture. When used with a determiner as in *the infinite*, the term is taken to mean in this paper an idea, quality, or state. The desire for the infinite finds expression precisely because it desires to be expressed. This expression tells us of its inherent nature; it licenses us to intuit the reason for its existence. The infinite is immaterial, unreachable. Humans express emotion and thought through both linguistic and non-linguistic means. This chapter provides evidence of such expression in three episodes of Italian culture. In all three cases, I adopt Italian writer Luigi Giussani’s understanding of the term, according to which «man is relation to the infinite». Man «accepts the infinite as his meaning» (GIUSSANI 1997: 9). The first episode, Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, was completed in 1599-1600. The second, Giacomo Leopardi’s *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’Asia* (1829-1830) is a powerful expression of a search for a response to the heart’s demand for desire. The third discusses aspects of the infinite throughout select cantos of Dante’s *Comedy* and its representations in English translation<sup>4</sup>. Throughout the chapter, I have also made references to other writers, particularly when their deployment of the *infinite* sheds light on the

<sup>3</sup> Nowhere was this made more evident than in John’s approach to teaching the *Comedy*, cf. KINDER 2022: 100: «One important reason for offering students the whole of Dante’s journey was the conviction that without the big picture – the total context of the poem – it is easy to misconstrue many details. In other words, the details that one encounters here and there throughout the poem only make sense within the context of the poem as a whole». Another aspect that struck me about John’s teaching was his authority, and, more than that, his continual references to *other* authorities. It was in this vein that Italian writer Luigi Giussani’s clarity of expression became clear through John’s words: «In order to see that each individual aspect in truth receives its full meaning only by its overall relationship to the whole, the ‘art of total vision’ is required» GIUSSANI 1998: 41.

<sup>4</sup> It gives me great joy to recall how John, continuing a long tradition of *lectura dantis* at The University of Western Australia, would also deliver his own *lectura* at yearly presentations to primary school students at a Catholic school near the university – and never forgetting to leave aside Dante’s descriptions of popes buried upside down and all!

typology of the term under examination<sup>5</sup>. All three works are dear to John. The chapter provides some description of the works, before thinking about how the representation of the universal elements characteristic of each object express the infinite and a desire for it. The motivation for the corpus selection in this chapter is based on strict criteria. These include John's love of these three writers, his masterful knowledge of these subjects, and perhaps most importantly, his desire to make them known to others. For this reason, his words and presence when introducing them to me as a pupil are burned forever (*infinitely*) in my mind. The search for the infinite, I hope, is an appropriate title for this chapter. It is also a reminder that the searching can be exemplified and instilled in oneself from an external source, not least of all teachers.

As an *addendum* to these preliminary remarks, it is helpful to recall a famous episode in the life of writer Luigi Giussani. A young man had gone to Giussani for confession, urged by his mother to do so, but who really had no faith. The young man expressed frustration during the discussion, extolling that «the true grandeur of man is represented by Dante's Capaneus». Giussani's response, in the form of a question, «But isn't it even greater to love the infinite?» led to a period of further reflection<sup>6</sup>. After two weeks, he returned to Giussani after having been 'eaten away' all summer by the question<sup>7</sup>. This chapter proposes an understanding

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, I use this term in the same sense provided in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In English, < Latin *INFINITUS* unbounded, unlimited, < «*IN-* + *FINITUS*» finite; perhaps originally through Old French *infini*, *-ite* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The first adjectival definition of *infinite* provided in the OED relates directly to the Creator: «Having no limit or end (real or assignable); boundless, unlimited, endless; immeasurably great in extent, duration, or other respect. **Chiefly of God or His attributes**; also of space, time, etc., in which it passes into the mathematical use». The earliest attestation in this mathematical sense is 1413, in *Pylgremage of Sowle*: «the largenes therof may not be comprehended by thought of mannes wytte; for it is **Infynyte**». The earliest entry in the Oxford English Dictionary of *infinite* (1b) is from c.1385 in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*: «Why lykede me... of thyn tunghe the **infynyt** graciousnesse». Nominally, the earliest attestation is dated 1587, in Sir Philip Sidney & Arthur Golding's translation of Philippe de Mornay's *De la vérité de la religion chrestienne*, translated as *Trewnesse of Christian Religion* (ii.15): «Two **infinites** cannot be abidden». In Italian, the term is present at the origins of the language, the earliest attestations (5 occurrences) date to 1268 and are all to be found in Andrea da Grosseto's *Volgarizzamento del De Arte loquendi et tacendi di Albertano*. First occurrence: («E certo **infiniti** esempi ti potrei dare ad esponere questa parola *che cosa* [...]»). The early sense of *infinite* relating to God (just as in the OED), is also reported for Italian, in the Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana (GDLI) at headword «*Infinito* 2» (p. 951): «che ha una potenza senza limiti; che non conosce limitazioni o impedimenti; assoluto, perfetto; che è superiore all'umana comprensione, trascendente; eterno, immortale (**Dio o i suoi attributi**)». The earliest example in the GDLI is from Jacopone da Todi (c.1230-1306), in a similar sense to the title of this volume: «**La Bontade enfinita vole enfinito amore**».

<sup>6</sup> Cf. DREHER 2017: 226: «The source of all disorder is loving finite things more than the infinite God».

<sup>7</sup> Giussani contrasts this example with that of the Anarchist, who forcefully affirms himself as

of the infinite in this same vein. The forms of artistic expression discussed below all provide (re)presentations of some form of this definition.

## **2. Caravaggio**

*The Calling of Saint Matthew* is the painting that «made Caravaggio famous forever» (ROBB 1998: 122). It was painted in 1599-1600, when Caravaggio was in Rome, and it is his first major church commission. It depicts the moment at which Jesus Christ inspires Matthew to follow him. The painting is in a church, San Luigi dei Francesi, in the Contarelli chapel, Rome. It depicts the story from the Gospel of Matthew (9: 9): «Jesus saw a man named Matthew at his seat in the custom house, and said to him, 'Follow me', and Matthew rose and followed Him». Most readers will know and recognise this painting. A salient characteristic, as in many of Caravaggio's works, is the light which illuminates the faces of the men at the table looking at Jesus. The light's beam barely brushes the halo floating softly above the head of Jesus.

How does this painting incarnate Caravaggio's desire for the infinite? The source of light is not indicated. Rather, the viewer takes for granted that it is a natural light that enters, as *given*. What is striking is its provenance, its direction, and the people whom it illuminates. It is the followers who have chosen to remain in the light, to position themselves in the room we are viewing, and who engage with a source of infinite energy. Like the origin of the language in which the painting is couched, the origin of light remains mysterious. As a variable, light is continuous, indiscreet, never-ending<sup>8</sup>. Aspects of the infinite in the work have been noted before. The 'suspension' of action, such as the stopping of the money counting, and the preservation of each figure in amber due to the light, creates a stillness that lasts «as long as you could keep your eyes on it. Which felt like fore-

the ultimate meaning of existence. Giussani recounts the episode of the young man and the Anarchist in Chapter 1 of *The Religious Sense*, p. 9: «anarchy from an anthropological perspective constitutes one of the great and fascinating temptations of human thought. As I see it, only two types of men capture entirely the grandeur of the human being: the anarchist and the authentically religious man. By nature, man is relation to the infinite: on the one hand, the anarchist affirms himself to an infinite degree, while, on the other, the authentically religious man accepts the infinite as his meaning».

<sup>8</sup> In this way, the light mirrors the famous quote from C. S. Lewis, delivered in 1944 to the Oxford Socratic Club, in a lecture entitled *Is Theology Poetry*: «I believe in Christ like I believe in the sun – not because I can see it, but by it I can see everything else». In discussing Lewis' *fedeltà al proprio cuore*, Fr Stefano Alberto reports two characteristics relating to his *vicenda umana*, that pick up the theme of *desire* mentioned at the start of this chapter. The first is Lewis' love for reason, while the second has to do with *l'amore per il proprio desiderio, per il desiderio di bello, di bene*. It is for this reason, Fr Alberto says, that Lewis «è sempre stato aperto, curioso, disposto ad andar dietro alle esperienze in cui quella felicità poteva mostrarsi in modo stabile» (ALBERTO 2009: 10).

ver» (ROBB 1998: 123). Technical aspects point to other ways in which the scene can be seen to represent the infinite. The action unfolds without framing. There is no indication regarding the size of the room, what is to the left, what is to the right, above or below. Items peripheral to the action are obscured. Such as the window that is neatly placed in the upper half of the quadrant, occupying almost an entire third of the whole. Strategically, it is positioned not above any one participant, but between the four players at the table and Jesus himself. The window to something outside, an intermediary between what we are viewing inside the scene and what lies beyond, creates a remarkable contradiction by opening up new possibilities of interpretation. For example, on the one hand, the window blocks us from what is on the other side. It recedes into the background: grimy, gritty, dirty. On the other hand, it allows us to imagine what Caravaggio might have thought to include if the pane had been left transparent. It creates a bridge between the sacred (Jesus, to the right) and the secular (money collectors, to the left). The connection between the two groups of subjects is not unidirectional. The linearity of the light is the direct path between Jesus and the others. Despite its opacity, the window leaves open an infinity of possibilities – that remain open also for us.

The historical evolution of the lexeme *light* itself alludes to other ideas of infinity. Its Proto-Indo-European root *\*leuk-* “light, brightness” contains the same semantic value then as it does now. Light as energy is a semantic addition. At its origin, the word has an auxiliary connotation: “that which makes things visible”. It took on a figurative, spiritual sense later, in Old English, but it retains this sense also throughout the (Germanic) family: Old English *leht* (Anglian), *leoht* (West Saxon), “light, daylight; spiritual illumination”, from Proto-Germanic *\*leukhtam*, we have Old Saxon *lioht*, Old Frisian *liacht*, Middle Dutch *lucht*, Dutch *licht*, Old High German *lioht*, German *Licht*, Gothic *liuhab* “light”. In these languages, *light* is a physical presence and a guide which reveals something to us. In Romance, the concepts are equally distinguished; all variants continue Latin *LŪX*, *LŪCIS*<sup>9</sup>. It is this sense of light which authors have felt reveals their own interior journey to truth, seeking greater *illumination* by considering the infinity in Caravaggio’s work. For example, Bricolo’s adoption of this metaphor in approaching Caravaggio’s paintings, leads him to:

un percorso interiore che ci può portare prima dentro di noi e poi a quel confine che frequentiamo poco e che è il limite del «finito» e l’inizio dell’infinito (BRICOLO 2014: 8).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. «God is light» (1 John 1:5); this analogy also in the earliest Italian poetry, including St Francis’ *Cantico delle Creature*: «Laudato sie, mi Signore cum tucte le Tue creature / spetialmente messor lo frate Sole / lo qual è iorno, et allumini per lui / Et ellu è bellu e radiante cum grande splendore: de Te, Altissimo, porta significatione». St Francis’ words, it is worth remembering, are echoed in the title of Pope Francis’ second encyclical *Laudato si’*.

These words strike me as a good description of prayer. The religious subject of Caravaggio's painting is not a closed room – but an “opening up” of reason. It is an event, providing a justification, a basis for what is happening. Reason enters in the form of a human being, from stage right; the left of the painting is unbound. The forms of infinity in the painting are didactic and indexical. They point the viewer to what its true meaning is. Part of this meaning is the infinite ways in which light penetrates human existence. Another part is reason in the form of an intervention that occurs in unexpected ways. Unexpectedness that can be seen on the face of Matthew himself. He appears stunned, pointing at his chest to ask a question, about whether it is really he who is being called while going about his boring, everyday business. This calling appears to have caught him by surprise; it is the unexpected expectation of the event itself which he is embracing.

### 3. Leopardi

Examples of infinity abound in the cultural objects of Italy's past. These concepts were first introduced to me in awe-inspiring ways by John over a series of presentations during undergraduate classes on 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian writer Giacomo Leopardi. It may seem strange that I have chosen to focus my attention *not* on his most well-known, and obvious, poem which embodies a sense of the infinite – his 1819 composition entitled, simply and perfectly, *L'infinito*. The sense of yearning so present in Leopardi's desire for the infinite can be seen everywhere, and, I suggest, even more poignantly in *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*. The shades of inquietude in the poem, so familiar to modern readers, juxtapose a resigned pessimism against the hope embodied by the protagonist's shepherd-philosopher. Already at a young age, and thanks to his father's (still) extant voluminous library, Leopardi had access to an incredible volume of scholarship. His interest in languages in particular is well-known, as is his learning as an autodidact. It was through his study of the Bible that Leopardi learnt Hebrew and Greek. The young Leopardi also had access to a curious edition of the Holy Scriptures printed in multiple languages; a monumental work, one Bible in particular, printed by the Anglican bishop Brian Walton in London between 1654 and 1657, which included texts in Arabic, Chaldean, Hebrew, Ethiopian, Persian, Samaritan, Syriac, as well as Latin and Greek (FRANCHI 2017: 552)<sup>10</sup>. This linguistic variety and Leopardi's early intellectual maturation allowed him to identify Homer and the Bible (following Alfieri)

<sup>10</sup> FRANCHI (2017: 552, n. 7) notes that, in addition, the library also included two tomes of the *Lexicon Heptaglotton Hebraicum, Chaldaicum, Syriacum, Samaritanum, Aethiopicum, Arabicum, et Persicum* by Edmund Castell. For an excellent overview of Leopardi's approach to language and linguistic diversity, see BIANCHI 2012.

as early sources for his writing, as he recalls in the *Zibaldone*. Here the poet from Recanati makes explicit mention not to infinity, but to infinite variety:

La Bibbia e Omero sono i due gran fonti dello scrivere, dice l'Alfieri nella sua Vita. Così Dante nell'italiano, ecc. Non per altro se non perch'essendo i più antichi libri, sono i più vicini alla natura, sola fonte del bello, del grande, della vita, della varietà. Introdotta la ragione nel mondo tutto a poco a poco, e in proporzione de' suoi progressi, divien brutto, piccolo, morto, monotono<sup>11</sup>.

The link between the infinite and variety is deeply tied to the other qualities deemed positive for him: nature, beauty, greatness, life. It is no surprise he looks to biblical writings as his inspiration for philosophical thought and revelations of the mystery. In a later entry, he again evokes the Bible during his reflection on concepts of the ancient and history:

Nella Bibbia bisogna considerare l'immaginazione orientale e l'immaginazione antichissima [...] Ben attese e pesate e valutate quanto si deve queste due qualità che nella Scrittura si congiungono, niuno più si farà maraviglia della straordinaria forza ch'apparisce ne' Salmi, ne' cantici, nel Cantic, ne' Profeti, nelle parti e nell'espressioni poetiche della Bibbia, alla qual forza basterebbe forse una sola di dette qualità<sup>12</sup>.

From its beginning, *Canto notturno* recalls passages from the Psalms (vv. 16-20; 84-89), whose rhetorical questions allow scope for a measured response: indeed, the fact of the question itself implies a possible answer. Unlike other creations such as *A Silvia*, where a developed narrative unfolds from stanza to stanza, the verses below, with their invocation of the moon, belie the concealed patterning and order of musicality with end-rhymes in *-ale*, *-elle*, *-ono*:

Dimmi, o luna: a che vale  
Al pastor la sua vita,  
La vostra vita a voi? dimmi: ove tende  
Questo vagar mio breve,  
Il tuo corso immortale? [...]

20

E quando miro in cielo arder le stelle;  
Dico fra me pensando:  
A che tante facelle?  
Che fa l'aria infinita, e quel profondo  
Infinito seren? che vuole dir questa  
Solitudine immensa? ed io che sono?

85

<sup>11</sup> *Zibaldone* 1028 (11 May 1821).

<sup>12</sup> *Zibaldone* 3543 (28 September 1823). See also PETRUZZI 2007.

What is the ‘infinito seren’? It is almost as if Leopardi wished to invoke the precise nature of the great power he cannot name, other than to describe it in terms guided by his intuition; it is the consequence that inevitably follows from his recognition of the depthness (*quel profondo*) that all humankind belongs to. And one wonders whether the philologist in him approached matters linguistic and biological in the same sense, with an urge towards infinity<sup>13</sup>. The questions articulated by Leopardi are described as the sole contribution of his philosophy and summarily dismissed as prepubescent in the words of Natalino Sapegno, despite these same questions recurring at all times in the whole of human history:

Le domande in cui si condensa la confusa e indiscriminata velleità riflessiva degli adolescenti, la loro primitiva e sommaria filosofia (che cosa è la vita? a che giova? quale il fine dell'universo? e perché il dolore?), quelle domande che il filosofo vero ed adulto allontana da sé come assurde e prive di un autentico valore speculativo e tali che non comportano risposta alcuna né possibilità di svolgimento, proprio quelle diventarono l'ossessione di Leopardi, il contenuto esclusivo della sua filosofia (SAPEGNO 1963: 240).

Another extract from the *Zibaldone*, and oft repeated by John, redefines man’s greatness only when aware of his minuteness<sup>14</sup>. This is especially the case when he knows himself to be infinitely part of something bigger. This is the greatest proof of man’s nobility:

Niuna cosa maggiormente dimostra la grandezza e la potenza dell’umano intelletto, né l’altezza e nobiltà dell’uomo, che il poter l’uomo conoscere e interamente comprendere e fortemente sentire la sua piccolezza. Quando egli, considerando la pluralità de’ mondi, si sente essere infinitesima parte di un globo ch’è minima parte d’uno degli infiniti sistemi che compongono il mondo, e in questa considerazione stupisce della sua piccolezza, e profondamente sentendola e intentamente riguardandola, si confonde quasi col nulla, e perde quasi se stesso nel pensiero dell’immensità delle cose, e si trova come smarrito nella vastità incomprensibile dell’esistenza; allora con questo atto e con questo pensiero egli dà la maggior prova possibile della sua nobiltà<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> The link between the ‘infinity of a vital force’ and the mutability of language was later addressed by Benvenuto Terracini, one of the most notable Italian linguists who lived through the important methodological innovations that characterized linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century. As HELLER-ROAZEN (2008: 72-73) remarks, when making a similar point discussing Terracini and the essential variability of all language: «But he [Terracini] recovered a biological power of a higher level, writing that ‘in the final analysis, the mutability of language expresses the infinity of a vital force that stands above the concept of death and even above the concept of birth’. See the section *Come muore una lingua* in TERRACINI 1957: 17.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. GIUSSANI 1997: 132: «Reason’s highest achievement is the intuition that an explanation exists exceeding the measure of reason itself».

<sup>15</sup> *Zibaldone*, 12 August 1823.

Leopardi's relationship to the infinite defines his ultimate meaning. In Italian writer Luigi Giussani's interpretation below, the heart is the source of reason precisely because it is relationship to the infinite:

Il vero discorso che anima tutte quante le parole del grande sofferente Giacomo Leopardi è che l'uomo è niente e tutta la sua grandezza consiste nel rapporto con l'infinito. Tutto l'universo, come la più piccola cosa, sono segno che lo richiama all'infinito. Qui sta la densità dell'essere umano. E il fondo del suo cuore attende in ogni cosa, in ogni cosa concreta, all'interno del grande universo, che la presenza segnata si palesi, rivesta "di sensibil forma l'eterno senno", porti "gli affani di funerea vita" con noi, compagno (GIUSSANI 1996: 25).

In this interpretation of Leopardi's expression, the whole universe (*tutto l'universo*) is a sign which 'calls us back', it 'reminds us' (*richiama*) of the infinite. This untranslatable verb also acts as sign for the interlocutor that the language we speak (and which is given to us) is a vocation, in the sense of CLAMARE. Since our capacity for speech is also infinite, language is an act of trust, placing us in direct relationship with the creator (KINDER 2008a). The search for the infinite also characterises contemporary Italian poets, such as in the following verses by Maria Luisa Belleli, in her poem *Il confine del mondo*:

Il confine del mondo è la tua guancia:  
oltre, nero s'incurva l'infinito.  
Guardandoti dormire io mi dispero.

Hai sollevato il velo  
delle palpebre: ondeggiava l'universo.  
Alzi il capo: dileguà l'orizzonte.  
Accenni un lieve gesto con la mano,  
e si disegna intorno un altro cielo.

According to the definitions provided at the start of this chapter, the infinite can be seen as one manifestation of the mystery. This manifestation is given a concrete form through language and its infinite capacities – language given by the creator; we humans in turn propel this infinity into other infinities, made up of languages proper, sounds, cries, burps, speech acts, noises, words etc. The language we use to think, too, points us toward the infinite 'nature of things', as highlighted during the 16<sup>th</sup>-century debates on language in Bernardino Tomitano's *Ragionamenti della lingua toscana*: «Ma che diremo della natura delle cose, la cognizione di cui apporta quasi una infinita copia di ragionare?» (TOMITANO 1546: 10). Unless written down or recorded, they are pushed out to the infinity of space before us, both physically and mentally. But even if they are written, their survivability is not guaranteed. Undeniably, the question of how to store such data is now a major problem in data science, as

manuscripts become lost, burned or damaged, and as electronic formats change and require ongoing maintenance. The language of these written materials, too, becomes potentially lost to the infinite. How many utterances, once words perfectly acceptable and understandable by whole societies, have disappeared forever from our purview? The gift of the infinite nature of language means more will be created. This position has been suggested by LEONE (2012), who argues that the deepest dynamic at the basis of meaning is *potentiality navigating*. The peculiarity of human meaning, he says, is founded on our *intuition of infinity*. The corollary is that religiosity can be considered a «matrix of grammars of infinity»<sup>16</sup>. In Leopardi's sense discussed above, man's relationship to the infinite defines his very substance (*densità*).

#### 4. Dante

The episode recounted at the start of this chapter about Luigi Giussani's conversation with a young man, finds resonance in contemporary culture<sup>17</sup>. It is educational to consider questions of infinity and their intersection with the poem. This goes especially for *Paradise*. Previous scholars have equated the infinite with a transcendent spirituality in this canticle. For example, «Dante also uses infinity, through his discussion of the empyrean, as an arrival at an infinite and divine space that exists in a single point but has infinite quality» (HIGGINS 2006: 4). The explosion of activity during the 700<sup>th</sup> year anniversary celebrations of Dante's death in 2021 demonstrated the consuming desire worldwide to engage with the poem. As JACOFF/PERTILE (2021: 247) note, «there is something paradoxical about commemorating Dante, for although he has been dead for seven centuries, he has never been more alive than in 2021». The persistent attraction of Dante can be explained by a simple fact: «desire

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the infinite variations possible due to language mixing, and how (if possible) language as structure can be defined in language change. On this point, see also the comments by GRASSI 2003, *Il parlante e l'infinito* (writing on MIGLIETTA's 2003 book): «la tematica dei confini intesi non come linee di separazione e di distinzione storico-genealogica ma come zone d'incontro e di scambio tra sistemi linguistici diversi [...] è da ricercare nelle tesi antipositiviste di Hugo Schuchardt, secondo le quali le ragioni e i modi del mutamento linguistico sono da ricercare proprio nella "mescolanza" tra lingue e dialetti diversi, così come si manifesta in particolare lungo le fasce di contatto» (GRASSI: 1). There is a large literature on the concept of linguistic infinity which, it would seem, has been at the core of human reflections on language, and especially from a theoretical framework. See, for example, HOLMQVIST/PUCIENNICK 2008; also NEFDT 2019 who notes that «the concept of linguistic infinity has had a central role to play in foundational debates within theoretical linguistics since its more formal inception in the mid-twentieth century» (ivi: 1671).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the infinite ways that Dante has been reinterpreted, beginning with his earliest commentators, as BRUNI (2021: 9) writes: «[...] Boccaccio ha reimpiegato nel *Decameron* un'infinità di spunti danteschi risemantizzati e reinterpretati coerentemente con la logica compositiva delle cento novelle, i cui fondamenti sono diversissimi da quelli della *Commedia*».

and free will are the heart of what it is to be human, at the centre of Dante's view of reality» (KINDER 2016: 10; also KINDER 2008a). Our knowledge of Dante's view takes the form of an encounter: as JACOFF/PERTILE (2021: 248) say, at a certain point, «we encountered Dante and were irresistibly converted to his 'religion'». This encounter unfolds through language. Language is what we are. Language for Dante:

constitutes us as relational beings, first in an intimately personal relationship with God who breathes our linguistic capacity into being in the womb, and subsequently with others, from our family and our neighbors to those distant individuals who may only be reached by the words of a text designed for longevity and travel (WEBB 2021: 464).

When it comes to Dante and language, the link has long been recognised between the poet's linguistic inventions and his understanding of the divine in *Paradise* (FERRANTE 1983; LUZZI 2010; ELMORE 2017; PHILLIPS-ROBINS 2022; TOMAZZOLI 2023). Language is a method to Christ. In Dante's vision, Christ is «understood as the reality that allows humans to share in a capacity for relatedness that *is not bound* by normal spatiotemporal limits» (PHILLIPS-ROBINS 2022: 157, my emphasis). This encounter between the divine and a human reality is one of the central questions in the *Commedia* (MONTEMAGGI 2016). Dante turns to «the language of humans being 'in' one another and 'in' God» (PHILLIPS-ROBINS 2022: 165), creating a cyclical trajectory of 'in-ness'. This connection between the infinite mystery and the ontological status of 'in' is given the following descriptor by MOEVS (2005: 76): «Although individual and finite, all angelic and beatified human intelligences are also one, each knowing all the others as immediately as it knows itself, because they all consciously participate in the one reality of Intellect-Being». This unity is a constant theme of *Paradise*, further seen in the concept of "in-him-ing" (*in luiarsi*, Par. IX 73, 81; XXII 127), «perhaps most powerfully expressed in the "skywriting" through which souls gather spontaneously to form emblems and words that point to the ground of their being, and through which that ground speaks». In short, linguistic creation and neologism in *Paradise* is, for Dante, simply an elaborated iteration of the Christian unity of reality<sup>18</sup>.

These comments remind us that the link between language and the infinite has characterized all Italian literature, from its very beginnings. The example of Manfred in *Purgatory* (III 118-123) from which the title for this volume is taken, indicates the *infinita misericordia* of God, in a microcosmic instance of confession and conversion<sup>19</sup>. In these tercets, the themes are forgiveness and vulnerability. In

<sup>18</sup> In discussing the Roman Christian poet Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-413 AD), DAWSON (2002: 61) remarks that «like Dante, he sees in the Empire a providential preparation for the unity of mankind in Christ». See the section *Classical Tradition and Christianity* at pp. 52-67.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis refers specifically to this episode in his Apostolic Letter *Candor lucis aeternae*

Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi's commentary to this line (p. 94, n. 122), Dante's language forever 'fixes' (*ferma per sempre*) the greatest events of the life of the spirit<sup>20</sup>. Dante's level of phonetic construction is described by Clive James as «an *infinitely* variable rhythmic pulse» (my emphasis)<sup>21</sup>. This coupling of language with Chiavacci Leonardi's descriptor that betokens infinity, is the capacity of language itself to put us (or rather Manfred) into relation with the infinite<sup>22</sup>. However, Dante also sees relationship to language and the infinite in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. His anthropology of language «imitates the division of the first human into an infinite series, each unit different from others, but all containing an originary 'DNA', identified in Genesis 1:26-27 as divine similitude» (NICHOLS 2012: 73-74), thus mirroring Leopardi's characterisation of *infinite systems* described above<sup>23</sup>.

It is striking that Dante uses neologisms to describe infinity and futurity. While the custom of neologisms was generally shunned from Cicero on (and Dante follows this tradition), his inventions manipulate language to create new spaces for what is or could be possible in human expression, in a direct link to the creator<sup>24</sup>. These neologisms «are not merely convenient coinages» but a «joyous participation in the potentiality of transcendent communion of mind and body, man and God, nature and the universe, and words and ideas» (SCHILDGEN 1989: 101-102). The ability for language to reach across time is something of which Dante reminds

in a subsection entitled *Poeta della misericordia di Dio e della libertà umana*. In discussing several spirits, Francis reminds us: «Si tratta di un cammino non illusorio o utopico ma realistico e possibile, in cui tutti possono inserirsi, perché la misericordia di Dio offre sempre la possibilità di cambiare, di convertirsi, di ritrovarsi e trovare la via verso la felicità». *Lettera Apostolica Candor Lucis aeternae del Santo Padre Francesco nel VII Centenario della morte di Dante Alighieri*, 25 marzo 2021, para 5. In the introduction to the Apostolic Letter, Francis again invokes the concept of the infinite, describing Dante as «profeta di speranza e testimone della sete di infinito insita nel cuore dell'uomo». See also PIROVANO 2021.

<sup>20</sup> «La potente immagine, che sembra ispirata dalla figura del Padre nella parola del Figliol prodigo (*Luc.* 15, 20), è di quelle veloci ed evidentissime, con le quali il grande linguaggio dantesco ferma per sempre gli eventi maggiori della vita dello spirito».

<sup>21</sup> JAMES 2013: XIV. On the following page, James describes the iterative nature of the infinite in his characterisation: «The lines, I found, were alive within themselves» (ivi: V).

<sup>22</sup> There are only two occurrences in the whole *Comedy* of the lexeme *infinita*. Both are in *Purgatory* III. Apart from its appearance in line 122 described above, the other occurs earlier in ll. 34-36: «Matto è chi spera che nostra ragione / possa trascorrer la infinita via / che tiene una sostanza in tre persone».

<sup>23</sup> Cf. BERCHI'S (2021: 6) remarks on *Par.* XXII in Saturn, following Beatrice's invitation to Dante to turn his eyes back to Earth: «l'umanità ha sempre saputo di abitare un semplice punto nel cosmo, un'«aiuola» – dal latino areola, piccola area. La novità della nostra epoca consiste nella possibilità di cogliere la nostra natura di punto non solo attraverso testi come il ventiduesimo canto del Paradiso, ma grazie a vere e proprie fotografie dallo spazio».

<sup>24</sup> For a partial list of neologisms used in *Paradise*, see SCHILDGEN (1989: 117).

us in the very final canto of the *Comedy*, again making a connection between language (this time, a reference to his poetry) and the future, in *Par.* XXXIII, 70-72<sup>25</sup>:

e fa la lingua mia tanto possente,  
ch'una favilla sol de la tua gloria  
possa lasciare a la **futura** gente

It is also in *Paradise* where Dante creates a form of reflexive futurity, an infinity when joy makes itself eternal, as in the final lines of *Par.* X, 146-148:

così vid'io la gloriosa rota  
muoversi e render voce a voce in tempra  
e in dolcezza ch'esser non pò nota  
  
se non colà dove gioir s'**insemp**ra.

This verb holds a very specific function in the entire system of the *Comedy*, «puisqu'il définit la durée sans fin de la joie du paradis» (ROSSI 2022: 20)<sup>26</sup>. It recalls the unity of vision described above, «dove l'incanto dell'armonia celeste è ridimensionato in una similitudine terrestre che si fonda su un candore di sensazioni intime dell'anima, cui corrispondono sensazioni visive di congegni meccanici assai complessi, nel cui nesso è da rilevare subito l'idea implicita del cerchio» (GIACALONE 1968: 171). Dante invents other neologisms to describe the infinite. In his encounter with his teacher Brunetto, the language of *Inf.* XV 85 reaches its height: «m'insegnavate come l'uom **s'eterna**»<sup>27</sup>. This dialogue between Dante and Brunetto «recreates the intimacy and familiarity of the kind of conversation that Dante and his teacher might really have had» (BAROLINI 2018: para 24). Dante pays homage to Brunetto, showing the “art of a teacher” and (with some pride), commenting on how «Brunetto fostered in Dante the gifts of a writer and poet, those gifts with

<sup>25</sup> Cf. BAROLINI's (1992: 140) comments on the use of *eternarsi* in an earlier episode with Brunetto: «the *Paradiso* does not conform to the theological grid by confirming the vanity of literary immortality».

<sup>26</sup> Rossi notes that renderings of this verb (*s'éternise*) in French translations of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries had become interpreted by a 'synthetic translation' relatively early, which is now «complètement dénouée, d'un point de vue formel, du signifiant italien». On p. 21, he writes that a transitive verb «éterniser» had already been recorded in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1694, «accompagné d'une définition suffisamment cohérente avec le sens du néologisme italien employé par Dante».

<sup>27</sup> I leave aside here the many other occurrences of *etern\** used nominally or adjectively, e.g. *fuoco eterno* (*Inf.* VIII 74), *eterni giri* (*Pur.* XXX 93), *eterni gemelli* (*Par.* XXII 152), *pregio eterno* (*Pur.* VII 18) etc., and the various nuances of what 'eternal' might mean. On Dante's use of *s'eterna* in these lines, KEEN (2018: 85) underlines the *new poetry* that Dante is creating: «Brunetto e Cicerone sono finalmente sostituiti da Virgilio, e dalla nuova poesia che Dante va creando nella composizione del poema».

which Dante wrote works destined for eternal renown» (BAROLINI 2018: para 43). This projection into the linguistic future also provokes us to consider where we have come from; in other words, «the handing down of language and the handing down of tradition are, in many respects, synonymous» (KINDER 2008b: 14).

There are more neologisms. In *Par. XV*, Dante meets his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida degli Elisei, who begins a long discourse. His speech continues into the next canto. By the time he arrives at *Par. XVII*, Dante had longed to ask Cacciaguida a question. Beatrice encourages him to speak freely. He writes (*Par. XVII* 97-99):

Non vo' però ch'a' tuoi vicini invidie,  
poscia che s'infutura la tua vita  
via più là che 'l punir di lor perfidie

Equally interesting is to consider the translation into English (and other languages) of these neologisms. There is insufficient space to enter into all the translations of each of these here. However, looking at just a few instances of how translators have interpreted «s'insempora» in *Par. X* 148 can point to the more general strategies at play<sup>28</sup>. The question is made more complicated by the fact that the English correspondents of the adverb *sempre* at the base of *insemprarsi* do not find a consistent one-to-one mapping into English, given that bilingual dictionaries and translators record several variants of *always*, *forever*, *still*, *continuously*, *endless*, and others. Nevertheless, writing in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, John D. Sinclair renders line 148 (*se non colà dove gioir s'insempora*) as *where joy becomes eternal*. Clive James chooses the same adjective, but places it before: *where eternal joy is real*, nominalizing *gioir* and decoupling the verb from its reflexivity and even its semantic value to emphasize the nature of reality. Musa adopts a similar strategy (*where joy becomes one with eternity*), opting for intransitivity while stressing a religious theme of unity. Durling has been the most literal, keeping Dante's reflexive when he writes *where rejoicing forevers itself*. Robin Kirkpatrick's translation, using British English blank verse, is imaginative, while respecting the original syntax. He mirrors Dante's words by combining the prefix *in-* and verbifying one correspondent of *sempre*, opting for 'ever', to produce *where joy in-evers all*. Burton Raffel's 2010 American English translation aims for creative destruction: *where joy is heavenly*,

<sup>28</sup> In the main, I have aimed to follow the same translations studied by HARRIS *et al.* 2023 in their review of 21<sup>st</sup> century translations of *Par. XXX*, albeit adding some others. Fascinating are the value judgements placed on the neologisms themselves by later scholars who comment on Dante's inventions, cf. MATTALIA (1960) on *s'insempora*: «Chiusa non felice, con un verbo di conio alquanto forzoso», contrasting the earlier comments by PORENA (1946-1948): «da un verbo *insemprare*, ardita formazione dantesca come altre fatte ugualmente su avverbi: *insusarsi da suso* (*Par. XVII*, 13), *indovarsi da dove* (*Par. XXXIII*, 138), ecc.».

thereby eliminating any allusion to a concept of ‘forever-ing’ in the source text but still maintaining coherence with the overall theme of the canticle. Stanley Lombardo’s metrical translation into American poetic vernacular preserves the rhythmic integrity of the source text, echoing Sinclair’s earlier translation: *where there is joy eternally*. His choice of adverb is traditional, imitating the grammatical category to which *sempre* belongs, and from which Dante created his neologism<sup>29</sup>. In short, what these translations show is what has long been known by those who have attempted to ‘translate’ Dante’s words, that is, «inevitable linguistic difficulties accompany any attempt made by a non-Italian reader to appreciate the poetry of the *Comedy*» (SCOTT 2004: 261). One might think that the words of even this one line can be translated no more, that they are finite. After all, how many different ‘ways of saying the same thing’, how many different combinations, syntagms, and expressions etc. can there be of a line which essentially involves combining *joy* and *eternal*? And yet. Dante’s words are continuing to be reproduced and, in turn, they themselves have (re)produced new meanings, spinning out seemingly infinite permutations. It will likely go on forever<sup>30</sup>.

Why should Dante create verbs that relate to infinity? And why reflexive ones? Language is the ‘bridge’ connecting humans to the infinity that is his destiny: «Between man and God, the Divine and the human, stands language, and language cannot be transcended even by a poet of Dante’s ability» (VERDICCHIO 2010: 169). The neologisms Dante ‘creates’ refashion contemporary lexemes, or revive old ones<sup>31</sup>. This linguistic economy continues a tradition, in a process of rewriting and rebirth. The ‘poetics of regeneration’ is itself «linked to the miracle of the Resurrection» bearing «ultimate witness to the comic nature of a human life that can end happily in God’s grace» (LUZZI 2010: 331). Reflexivity is a pointer towards the creator. The linguistic creation works as a sort of signpost for us, alerting us to the creation of eternal mystery in ourselves. It’s a conversation, talk. But, for Dante, «there is nothing more fascinating than a conversation, as those waiting for a banquet to start know. It is the time when we see ourselves in another and another in ourselves» (MAZZOTTA 2014: XI). This is the sign of mystery.

<sup>29</sup> LOMBARDO’s note (2017: 393) to this line mentions that «However much these very wise men were able to contemplate eternal truths while still in the flesh, the full sweetness of the experience can only be enjoyed in Heaven itself».

<sup>30</sup> ELMORE 2017: 18: «Language is itself an infinitely renewable good, enabling a vision beyond (but not without) the materiality of the senses».

<sup>31</sup> For an excellent overview of these processes and other aspects of Dante’s neologisms, including the question of their fate, see GHINASSI 1970. While there is insufficient space here to enter into a discussion of these processes, he notes that «Uno dei campi più fertili è senza dubbio quello delle formazioni verbali parasintetiche, e, in special modo, dei parasinteti verbali in cui intervenga il prefisso in-».

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to discern various aspects of the infinite throughout seemingly random episodes of Italian culture, from the middle ages to the present. While much of this discussion has been philological, I have attempted to draw on sources and interpretations of different periods to show how the question of the infinite has always been at the core concern for authors and artists throughout Italy's history. Admittedly, there is a somewhat loose 'read thread' that runs through this paper. Much in the way John's scientific output has covered a truly impressive range of topics and disciplines that are broad in nature, this chapter has equally bounced from one *topos* to another. What ties them together is not one theoretical framework or tool of analysis, but a desire on behalf of these artists (and my own) to adopt an approach that is whole. This attitude was, and remains, just one of the many charismatic qualities of John for which I am grateful.

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